just petty days, just bubble days

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by AppleSharon

Summary

“Foolish,” Hat Guy says derisively. “You’ll make yourself ill.”

Sethos laughs and laughs and to his surprise Hat Guy, for all of his obvious irritation at Sethos’ presence, stays seated at the next table over, content to sip tea quietly as the rain pounds against the umbrella above him.

The rain sluices down Sethos’ body, refreshing and cool on his skin.

It’s like nothing Sethos has felt before.

For the first time since his grandfather died, the pain in his chest disappears.

After becoming the leader of the Temple of Silence, Sethos finds himself struggling with the weight of those expectations. To his surprise, he finds common ground and companionship with Hat Guy, a mysterious and beautiful young man he meets accidentally at the Akademiya.

Notes

I read Sethos' lore and voicelines and this came out. Spoilers for Cyno's second story quest.

petty days

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The lid of the coffin is cold to the touch, his fingerless gloves doing nothing to keep the grittiness of the sand from his fingertips.

“Did you see, Grandpa?”

He whispers so Cyno and the others don’t hear the pain in his voice. He’s already lost once to them and while that was fully within the scope of their plans, it still hurts, even now. His fingers tremble against the stone surface.

“Cyno chose me to succeed you as leader of the Temple of Silence. I will now serve in his stead.”

Sethos had expected his grandfather’s death.

They had anticipated it together.

They had factored it into their plans of luring Cyrus out from his cosy retirement and back to the temple with General Mahamatra Cyno in tow.

It doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“It's still early days, and I can't say that I know him that well yet. But after that battle, I now understand why he came here with a whole group of friends.”

Despite his reputation at the temple for being the friendly one, Sethos doesn’t have many friends.

And the closest friend he had just died.

“Companionship means to trust and be trusted. Just like Cyno and his friends, we too will fight side by side and support each other in times of trouble.”

He wants to believe it. The weight of leading the Temple of Silence sits heavily on his shoulders as he bends over and whispers this last part to his grandfather.

“Goodbye.”

Cyno is saying something to him. Sethos steels himself, sandals sliding across eroding sandstone tiles as he turns on his heels, smiling as brightly as he can.

“—arrange for an official delegation from the Akademiya to come and meet you in the desert,” Cyno is saying.

Next to Cyno, Tighnari shoots him a small and encouraging smile, a curtain of dark bangs falling over his forehead as he tilts his head to the side.

Sethos doesn’t think he’s exaggerating when he tells himself that Tighnari is probably the most beautiful man he’s ever seen in his life. He’s so different from anyone Sethos has met and Sethos finds himself wanting to know everything about the dark-haired Forest Watcher.

Briefly, he imagines dazzling Tighnari with stories of his ancestors, Cyno following along as well in rapt attention.

“I'm sure you'll have lots to attend to in the days ahead,” Cyno continues, “but once things return to normal, please come and visit the rainforest again. You should stay for a few days this time, and start to build some relationships.”

It feels like there’s a hole in his chest that everyone can somehow see and he finds himself lifting his hand, tangling it in the yellow scarf his grandfather gave him as a child.

Like something that was a part of him has been forcibly and violently ripped out and now everyone is watching to see if he can withstand the pressure and pain.

Sethos supposes that this is technically true now that he no longer harbours a Ba Fragment, but Hermanubis never spoke to him like his grandfather said that the ancient sage should.

After all, if Hermanubis was such a crucial part of him, he should have helped him win the duel against Cyno.

“If we're going to work together, both sides have to get to know one another better,” Cyno finishes, nodding sternly.

Tighnari’s eyes droop sleepily and Cyno nudges him awake. It’s a casual gesture between two people who obviously know each other

very well and Sethos follows the motion before ducking his head, embarrassed for reasons he can't quite comprehend at the moment.

His chest aches and his fingers tighten from where they're placed in the fabric of his scarf over his heart.

"I will," he tells Cyno with a smile and a false eagerness he hopes will feel more real by the time the delegation arrives.

Right now, he can't imagine the Temple of Silence without his grandfather to guide it. And he certainly can't imagine leading it himself, despite the fact that this too was part of their plan.

A contingency, his grandfather would have said.

They had many, including failsafes had they been unable to lure Cyrus with their first strategy. But they hadn't needed to use any of them and everything had gone pretty much as expected.

Even his grandfather's death.

"Alright, well…"

There's nothing but pleasantries left and he reaches forward to grasp Cyno's hand, squeezing it firmly. Cyno's grip is a solid warmth that steadies him as their callused fingers tangle together briefly before he lets go and bows at the group.

"Bye for now, everyone. I'll be seeing you."

When he waves goodbye as they make their way down the temple steps, he's only half-certain that he'll ever see any of them but Cyno again.

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The promised letter from the Sumeru Akademiya and Lesser Lord Kusanali comes less than a week later to Sethos' genuine surprise. It's more direct and less flowery than Sethos would have expected from an Archon — a simple summons to meet with her and inspect the Temple of Silence's office at the Akademiya itself.

In "the interest of repairing the relationship between their two organizations," she writes, signing her name with little flourish.

There's still a yawning hole in his chest — one that Sethos has realized is a combination of the absence of Hermanubis and his

grandfather but he's having trouble separating the two.

When he looks at the other members of the temple he sees their trust but also their pity, especially when he has to leave with Lesser Lord Kusanali's delegation.

The Sumeru Akademiya is beautiful. It seems to grow from the rainforest itself, stately architecture intertwining with the branches of the Great Tree. Every campus building seems to be an offshoot of a tree branch, blending stone and a giant canopy of leaves together in harmony.

Sethos has never seen anything like it.

He smiles at everyone he passes, greeting them with a friendly wave and wishes for good fortune because his grandfather always told him that it couldn't hurt to do so, even during his final days filled with more bitterness than love.

To his surprise, most of them take the time to smile back, their worried expressions smoothing out just for a moment to greet the odd young man from the desert. Sometimes it's as if Sethos can see himself through their eyes and with every impression he makes, he feels a bit lighter.

More like himself somehow, even if he doesn't know yet what that person is supposed to look like.

In the crowds of Akademiya students and noise of Sumeru City, things begin to hurt a little less. People are nice to him, even while visibly irritated and frustrated by their own studies, more than willing to help him find his way through the throngs of people filling the Akademiya hallways.

When Lesser Lord Kusanali looks at him, seated across from Sethos as they dust off the unused desktop in the Temple of Silence Office at the Akademiya, he knows that she sees the hole from the way her eyes widen, sadness flickering through them.

Before she can say anything, a knock interrupts their meeting. The door opens with a loud bang and a dark-haired man with a deep scowl set around his mouth pokes his head into the Temple of Silence Office, refusing to wait for either of them to invite him in.

"I've told you time and again that I have no need for food," the man says. He slams a small cloth-wrapped box down onto the desk, causing

the few papers that Sethos and Lesser Lord Kusanali had been organizing to flutter onto the floor.

A cloud of dust accompanies it and Sethos coughs.

Captivated by the gigantic hat on the man's head, Sethos stares as he clears his throat. Rich brocade and silk trails from it, swirling around the man like a large cape. At the ends of the fabric, bells jingle angrily with every movement the man makes. The man scoffs, presumably at the sorry state of the office, and then points an accusatory finger at Lesser Lord Kusanali.

"Stop trying to help me."

If the Archon is at all annoyed by the man's audacity, she doesn't show it but Sethos is speechless. He doesn't know Lesser Lord Kusanali well at all, but almost feels honour-bound to defend her in the face of such rudeness.

As if she can read his mind, the small Archon holds up her hand in Sethos' direction and shakes her head.

"What if I was to tell you that I'm practicing cooking?"

"Hmph. If you were, then I think you should waste your results on someone else."

With another sour expression, the man tilts the brim of his hat over his face, obscuring it completely from Sethos' view. "Sorry for the interruption," he says without sounding at all apologetic.

And then the man is gone, the bells on his hat tinkling with every brusque step he takes down the hallway, growing quieter and quieter as he walks away.

"Don't mind him," she tells Sethos with a disapproving click of her tongue. "He doesn't mean any harm."

Sethos wants to respond that this isn't really the point.

He also wants to ask who the man is and why he's wearing such a ridiculous hat and why he seemed so angry but another careful stare from Lesser Lord Kusanali has Sethos leaning forward in his chair and collecting the scattered papers from the floor.

He has work to do.

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After his meeting with Lesser Lord Kusanali, Sethos goes to Gandharva Ville to take Tighnari up on his outstanding dinner offer.

Cyno escorts him there, citing urgent business with Tighnari that he's oddly cagey about. When Sethos asks if there's anything he can do to help — Cyno is the closest thing he has to a mentor now, and also the closest thing he has to family in a way — and Cyno changes the subject immediately to Sethos' stewardship over the temple and how things have been in his grandfather's absence.

"I haven't been there much since you left," he admits, feeling a bit guilty as the words leave his mouth. The other Temple of Silence members had wholeheartedly encouraged him to leave and make contacts at the Akademiya, but it still feels like he's abandoned them in a way. He admits this to Cyno, who purses his lips and shakes his head.

"I doubt they feel that way. If anything, they're probably proud of you for handling the temple's business with the Akademiya."

Sethos wants to ask how Cyno would know this, but doesn't want to bother him about it. Instead, he smiles and sheepishly scratches his neck, avoiding Cyno's knowing look.

"Either way, Lesser Lord Kusanali was really helpful! It must be nice having such a competent Archon to look over Sumeru City. I had heard some odd things about her a while ago but she was so nice in person! Guess that's why you shouldn't believe everything you hear!"

"Did you wear sunglasses to your meeting?" Cyno asks him suddenly as a series of large tents and wooden bridges come into view. It looks like pictures Sethos had seen in a storybook once: a city made of treehouses and everything impossibly green and radiant in the yellow warmth of the sun.

Confused and distracted by the scenery, Sethos narrowly avoids tripping over a large mushroom in their path and steps into a puddle instead. He groans as he shakes off his foot. His sandal is now soaked in muddy water.

"Ah…no I didn't. Why?"

"Because you have a bright future ahead of you."

Sethos blinks and stares at Cyno, wondering if he heard him incorrectly.

“Because you need sunglasses to block out the brightness of the sun. And bright can also mean—”

“Now, now, that’s enough of you torturing our guest.”

The sound of Tighnari’s voice startles Sethos, who nearly stumbles onto the ground.

“Torture?!”

Cyno sounds both hurt and offended, glaring at where Tighnari is smirking at them from up the road even as he reaches down to lend a hand to Sethos.

“Come on,” Tighnari says, his stern tone leaving no room for discussion. “Collei has already prepared the camping equipment.”

Grumbling something under his breath, Cyno quickens his pace and falls in step with Tighnari, leaving Sethos to follow them into town.

“Don’t mind them,” an unfamiliar voice says next to his ear. “They’re always like this.”

Startled for the second time in less than a few minutes, Sethos jumps. When he turns in the direction of the voice, he sees a friendly young woman with light green hair standing next to him. A dendro vision swings from her belt and her fuchsia-coloured eyes stare at him intently.

“I’m Collei,” she says, introducing herself brightly and holding out her hand for Sethos to take. “I work as a Forest Ranger with Tighnari.”

Relieved by her welcoming demeanour and friendly smile, Sethos breathes a loud sigh of relief, only now realizing that he had been oddly on edge during the entire walk here.

Collei’s hands are similarly calloused and he sees the look of recognition and approval in her eyes that only comes from another archer as she shakes his hand firmly. “While they take their time catching up, why don’t we set up the tents?”

Later, Sethos will realize that this is Collei’s way of giving Cyno and Tighnari a small moment of privacy.

Now, he's simply happy at how easy Collei is to get along with.

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Sethos settles onto the straw pallet laid out for him — presumably by Collei — inside the tent he had set up earlier, throwing his arm over his eyes as if it will somehow stave off his lingering embarrassment.

It doesn't.

The evening had been somewhat of a disaster and Sethos still isn't sure where exactly things went awry, only that it did go horrifically wrong.

The hollow, aching feeling returns and he flops onto his side, pressing his fingers into his chest just above his heart as if that will make it go away.

He had just wanted to help and make himself useful — and admittedly, maybe impress Tighnari a bit — by setting up the tents, but his eagerness had been off-putting to Collei, who had then felt like he had taken her job away. They had solved it by talking it through but she had still seemed hurt afterwards. Sethos isn't so unaware that he hadn't realized there was something else going on with Collei, Tighnari, and Cyno that he had accidentally inserted himself into.

After a fishing contest with Cyno — which Sethos fully admits they both may have gotten a bit too competitive about — Tighnari had headed up to Gandharva Ville centre to check on Collei and, Sethos now realizes as he winces at the memory, to get away from him and Cyno.

And then when he had walked up to the main Forest Rangers' Station to apologize—

"You didn't do anything wrong, Cyno."

Tighnari's voice drifts from beyond the canvas tent into the humid night air. Sethos' hand freezes just before he was about to pull the tent flap back and announce his presence.

"She's just feeling a bit distant since she's been at the Akademiya lately."

Tighnari says something else, too quiet for Sethos to hear, accompanied by the rustling of clothing.

A fire crackles loudly and Sethos sees the shadows of Tighnari and Cyno draw closer together as they stretch and flicker against the cloth walls of the tent dancing in the firelight. He watches, wide-eyed, as the shadows merge together. Overwhelmed by his own curiosity, Sethos brushes his fingertips against the tent flap and pulls it it open just slightly, revealing a sliver of the scene inside.

Cyno is holding Tighnari in his arms, stroking his hand through Tighnari's dark hair. Tighnari's tail twitches on the ground, sweeping across the dirt floor.

"It's been a while," Tighnari murmurs into Cyno's neck, kissing it softly. "I've missed you too."

Cyno says something else that Sethos can't hear and Tighnari's hands tighten from where they're wrapped around Cyno's back. There's a quiet and warm intimacy between them that Sethos internally kicks himself for not seeing sooner. It reminds Sethos of the softness between his grandfather and grandmother, before she had died.

He feels something drip onto his cheek and quickly wipes it off with the back of his hand.

Looking up to see if it's raining, Sethos finds a blanket of stars staring back at him from beyond the forest canopy and realizes that he's crying.

Embarrassing.

Releasing the flap with a small rustling sound, he sprints away from the Forest Rangers' Station and back towards his own tent, cheeks and eyes and chest burning.

Groaning, Sethos digs the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees stars, hoping that the momentary pain will somehow erase the mortification he feels. There's no way that Tighnari didn't know he was there, not with the enhanced hearing of a fox-human hybrid.

The musty and earthy scent of damp straw fills his nostrils. Inhaling slowly, Sethos takes his time to breathe in the smells of the forest. Most of them are unfamiliar and assault his senses, overwhelming him easily. The loud cries of dusk birds, buzzing insects, and the crashing of some animal in the creek below attack his ears until they blend into a deafening hum.

Gasping, Sethos stumbles out of his tent and walks aimlessly down the dirt path to the edge of Gandharva Ville. He doesn't know where he's

going, only that he needs to get out and go somewhere.

That somewhere turns out to be a large log overlooking the river and Avidya rainforest floor where Tighnari is keeping watch. Before Sethos even approaches, Tighnari's ears twitch and the Forest Watcher turns around, greeting Sethos with a welcoming smile and a motion to sit down next to him.

Plastering a smile on his face, Sethos takes a seat where Tighnari had gestured. The dampness of the wood seeps through his trousers and Sethos shifts, trying to get comfortable.

"Are you alright?" Tighnari asks without looking at him, eyes trained on the stars.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Turning his head sharply, Tighnari shakes his head. "I won't force you to tell me the truth, but you can't fool these ears."

"I—"

Sethos' voice cracks awkwardly and he stops talking.

He doesn't even know what he was going to say — maybe apologize to Tighnari for listening in on Tighnari and Cyno's conversation, or for taking his competition with Cyno too seriously but he doubts that Tighnari would care or appreciate that. Now that he's thinking through what he feels it's more that he wants what Tighnari and Cyno have for himself and wants it desperately.

Sethos doesn't think he should have to apologize for that at all.

They sit side-by-side in without speaking.

For some reason, the noise of the forest is more manageable out here than it was in the ranger tent, but Sethos still doesn't think he could sleep through it.

As if the forest itself aims to prove him right, something crashes through the underbrush and he jumps, gripping at the bark of the log so hard it crumbles in his fingers.

Tighnari chuckles, soft and wry.

"I had a lot of trouble living in Sumeru City, especially at first," he says unprompted. His eyes gleam a bright green and brown, focused

on the forest floor beneath the hill. “You know how I said that I struggle in the desert heat?”

“It didn’t seem like you had trouble at all,” Sethos says ruefully, recalling what it had been like on the receiving end of Tighnari’s constant volleys of arrows. He absentmindedly rubs his arm, messaging out a phantom pain at the memory.

“It’s hard to know what types of trouble people have if they don’t show it to you,” Tighnari tells him sagely. “That’s what companions are for, to share the burden. Regardless, my body doesn’t do well in the desert, but my ears also can’t stand the noise of Sumeru City. Whenever it got too loud, Cyno would always notice and help.”

Shifting his feet, Tighnari swings them over the edge of the log, kicking them in the air like a child. Giggling, Sethos follows suit, watching the water lazily flow in the small valley below them.

“What did he do?” Sethos asks when Tighnari doesn’t continue the story.

“He would follow me to the Amurta Darshan’s gardens at Pardis Dhyai and keep me company. It was much quieter there.”

Sethos nods and stops moving his feet. Something else, another animal, moves through the scrub trees at the water’s edge, causing a few dusk birds to screech shrilly as they take flight to avoid it.

“I think Cyno would help you too,” Tighnari says after a surprisingly comfortable silence. “If you let him. You’re a bit like family already.”

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When he returns to the city, Sethos stops by Puspa Café for some coffee and baklava on Collei’s recommendation.

He chooses a table outside, underneath one of the sun umbrellas, despite the fact that the air is so humid that Sethos feels like he’s walking through a fine mist and increasingly-angry-looking clouds are gathering in the sky. Looking out across the wooden railing, Sethos breathes in the warm steam and bitter scent of his coffee and closes his eyes.

Sumeru City is loud.

From where he sits he can hear a fortune teller calling out to potential

customers and a couple arguing over the price of a glazed clay mug with a pottery vendor. Sethos can understand why Tighnari was overwhelmed.

Yet there's something about it that settles him more than the sounds of the Avidya Forest.

It doesn't make sense.

Opening his eyes, Sethos takes a sip of his coffee and leans back in his chair.

The desert is loud in its own way that's different from the city, but somehow, being surrounded by people — chattering, rushing, living — reminds him of home.

A flash of blue in his periphery and a familiar chiming of a bell catch Sethos' attention, distracting him from his thoughts.

"Hat Guy!" he nearly yells, recognizing the enigmatic and angry man who had interrupted his meeting with Lesser Lord Kusanali.

"Hat Guy?"

The man looks disgusted as he repeats what Sethos called him. Maybe he's simply disgusted by Sethos himself. The lines around his mouth seem carved into a permanent frown, mirrored by creases in his brow and small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Bracing himself for an inevitable public dressing down, Sethos clenches his fists at his sides.

"Don't call me that," the man says, whipping his head away from Sethos and towards the main Akademiya building. His fingers tap anxiously on the table in front of him and after an awkward moment where neither of them say anything, Hat Guy sits down in the furthest seat away from Sethos at the next table over.

Sethos tries to forget that Hat Guy is there but his curiosity gets the better of him and he finds himself looking up over the rim of his coffee mug, watching the dark-haired man with obvious interest.

"Didn't your parents teach you that it's not polite to stare?" Hat Guy spits out bitterly.

The café manager comes out, bringing a tray of tea to Hat Guy. She

seems familiar enough with him that his curtness doesn't even seem to register — or perhaps she's just used to rude and preoccupied customers. From what little Sethos has seen of Sumeru City, even if people have been friendly with him directly, most students operate in a constant state of raw nerves and are one setback away from a coursework-induced meltdown.

Tearing his eyes away from Hat Guy, Sethos drains the rest of his coffee, suddenly too impatient to sit and sip like he had initially intended. He tips even further back in his chair, leaning out from beneath the orange-coloured café table umbrella.

Something immediately drips onto his cheek and he looks up.

Another droplet hits his eye.

And then another.

"Whoa…it's raining!"

Sethos turns to Hat Guy with what he's certain is a dopey and ridiculous smile on his face but can't find it in himself to care about how stupid he probably looks.

Spreading his arms wide, Sethos throws his head back and revels in the sensation of raindrops hitting his face. They drip down his neck and he feels his hair stick wetly to his forehead.

Hat Guy raises an eyebrow, his deep frown shifting into confusion. "Have you never seen rain before?"

"Not like this!"

"Foolish," Hat Guy says derisively. "You'll make yourself ill."

Sethos laughs and laughs and to his surprise Hat Guy, for all of his obvious irritation at Sethos' presence, stays seated at the next table over, content to sip tea quietly as the rain pounds against the umbrella above him.

The rain sluices down Sethos' body, refreshing and cool on his skin.

It's like nothing Sethos has felt before.

For the first time since his grandfather died, the pain in his chest disappears.

Chapter End Notes

From what we know of them, I actually think these two could find a lot of common ground, Sethos covering any/all pain up with affability and the willingness to do anything for anyone and Scaramouche being...the opposite of that.

Hope you all enjoyed! Right now this is looking like two chapters total but may change to three.

bubble days

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for Sethos' lore and backstory.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sumeru City seems small compared to the Temple of Silence.

Logically, Sethos knows that it's much larger.

The Akademiya alone is a maze of interconnected individual buildings and even some of those house more people than the temple did with its dwindling amount of acolytes and the Ba Fragments having been split in two. But the throngs of people in the hallways, the hushed study groups in the House of Daena, and the bustling stores of the Grand Bazaar and Treasures Street make the city feel smaller and more intimate than the near-empty mausoleum he had left in the desert.

It's comfortable. Sethos wears his growing familiarity with various Akademiya students and the uncles and aunties of the food stalls.

He learns from Izem that Enteka is technically the interim manager of Puspa Café but also that she has the job until she doesn't want it anymore and that Izem believes the café will close when that happens.

He learns that even though Khaldun and Yavanani argue constantly, they always make sure the other gets home when one of them has had too much to drink that night.

He learns that Afshin knows the truth of his own wares but makes up stories to see how many people he can trick into believing them for his own amusement. Sethos doesn't understand this but laughs when Afshin admits it to him one night after the Zubayr Theatre's latest play closes.

And when Sethos feels lonely and misses the way that the desert heat settles around him like a blanket — even while his scarf remains pressed over his nose and mouth so he doesn't breathe in the blowing sand — and his chest begins to ache, he walks through the crowds of Sumeru City and finds something to do.

There's always someone who needs help somewhere.

That's what his grandfather used to say, sometimes.

***

After talking to Hat Guy in the café, Sethos begins to see him everywhere in the city.

A flash of blue fabric in his periphery vision.

The increasingly-familiar tinkling sound from a nearby alley or from behind a half-closed door.

The sound of stray grains of sand trapped between black Inazuman-style sandals and the stone walkways of the Akademiya fading into fleeting footsteps.

Sethos has never seen someone move through space like Hat Guy. Even the most graceful temple dancers, some of whom had come to them directly from eremite tribes famous for their dancing abilities and legacies, don't compare. Hat Guy's body slices through the air with the precision of a sharp blade — purposeful and dangerous and so decisive that his movements almost seem inhuman.

If it wasn't for the long scraps of blue fabric trailing behind his ornately-carved wooden hat and the sound of the bells on the ends of them, Sethos thinks that Hat Guy would move through the city completely unnoticed by anyone, even Sethos himself who admittedly has begun looking for the beautiful messenger in the Sumeru City crowds.

It's almost like a game.

Momentarily distracted by the bright blue colour of Hat Guy's cape vanishing from view before Sethos can call out to him, Sethos forces himself to pay attention to Mairamou shoves a lunchbox into his hands as thanks for helping her with her soup stand.

As far as Sethos knows, Mairamou is the only auntie who sells anything close to the ajilenakh nut soup his grandfather used to make.

He still thinks she should put the fried fish rolls on her menu, but she always smiles and pinches his cheeks and tells him that they're for friends and family only. They're unlike anything else Sethos has tasted before in his life, foreign and familiar somehow at the same time.

Mairamou certainly treats him like family, from feeding him regularly

to needling him about his future.

“You never say no to any task! Don't tell me you actually enjoy running errands?”

She asks this while Sethos is eating a mouthful of fish roll.

Without thinking, Sethos opens his mouth to respond and quickly closes it, shaking his head apologetically at his rudeness for chewing with his mouth open.

Instead, he stands next to her stall, half-eaten lunchbox of fried fish rolls in his hands, swallowing around the layers of flaky pastry and spiced marlin while trying to come up with the best answer to her question.

He’s never really thought about it before.

Whenever he grows restless, he just does errands.

There’s always someone who needs help somewhere.

Sethos hears this in his grandfather’s voice.

Absentmindedly licking the last bits of fish paste from his fingers, he savours the almost-numbing sensation of pepper and harra fruit spice.

At the Temple of Silence, Sethos had spent most of his time with his grandfather.

It isn’t until this moment that he realizes that there hadn’t been many wayward errands to run at the temple. Every one of his grandfather’s anecdotes, every mundane cleaning task, every camping trip and hunting excursion, had also been training for becoming the new emissary of the Sage Hermanubis.

And later, preparation for Sethos assuming the place of leader and steward of the Temple of Silence.

Assuming his grandfather’s position.

Bamoun, the Bearer of Bloodshed.

“The priest said that you would have the dexterity of the fox and the agility of the flying serpent.”

He remembers his grandfather saying this during one of their camping

trips. That particular trip had devolved into pouring over stray research papers that his grandfather had bought off of an eremite salesman a few months ago. Sethos had secretly been glad for new reading material — the annals of Sage Hermanubis are written in a long-obsolete script and occasionally trend esoteric at best. His surreptitious glances over his grandfather's shoulder had easily turned into studying the papers together.

Blinking, Sethos finds that Mairamou is staring at him with a concerned expression on her kindly face, white eyebrows knitted with worry.

"Hunh, you're right."

He picks up another fish roll from the box, twirling it between his fingertips. "Come to think of it, I really do enjoy running errands."

"You don't want a better line of work?" Mairamou asks, tapping him gently on his shoulder. "You seem to know a lot, and you're pretty capable, too. If you'd like, I could help you find a job."

Before he finds a way to say this aloud somehow, he spots a flash of light blue in the distance and hears the quiet tinkling of bells. When Sethos turns in the direction of the sound, he sees him.

Hat Guy.

A now-familiar electric frission shoots down his spine at the sight. He feels it every time he catches a glimpse of the Vahumana researcher.

Brandishing the fish roll like a baton, Sethos points over Mairamou's shoulder at the graceful figure leaping across the branches of the Great Tree courtesy of his Anemo vision.

"What do you think that person's doing?" Sethos asks her.

Mairamou squints at the figure in the distance.

"Isn't that another errand-runner?"

She sounds unsure. Sethos can't tell if she's actually able to get a glimpse of Hat Guy before he disappears behind a large tree branch that runs parallel to the stone path towards the Sanctuary of Surasthana.

"That's Hat Guy, a student from Vahumana who's known for his

speed," he tells her. Flushing slightly as he realizes how reverent he sounds, Sethos clears his throat. "But I've heard that sometimes, he also gets called on to deliver letters for the Akademiya."

Mairamou turns and now squints directly at Sethos with an incredulous expression.

"Do you mean…that's just what he likes to do?"

A bright laugh slips from Sethos lips. He covers his mouth, hoping that it doesn't sound like he's mocking her obvious confusion. She sounds unconvinced that anyone would be satisfied with doing odd tasks around the city for others or delivering messages instead of waiting for one of the Akademiya's many dusk birds to be available.

To her point, from what little he knows of Hat Guy, Sethos would say that Hat Guy despises both running errands and being a messenger. Fortunately, this fact should help prove his point to Mairamou.

"No, no, I don't think he likes it," he says, still laughing "but I'm not like him. I'm a people person, and I enjoy running errands and taking on the easy tasks."

He stuffs the remaining fish roll into his mouth, quickly chewing and swallowing it as he closes the lunchbox. Carefully, he places it beside Mairamou's stall, where a large pot of soup is threatening to bubble over.

It smells amazing — sweet and savoury and nutty.

Looking up into the direction where Hat Guy had leapt, Mairamou shades her eyes from the spots of sunlight shining through the thick canopy. The doubtful expression still hasn't left her face.

"And look, you even treated me to a meal!" Sethos adds. "Besides, I've got a proper job too, so don't worry about me."

He leaves before she can ask after his proper job or what it entails.

***

The sunsets in the city are vastly different from the ones Sethos grew up with in the desert. They creep up on him as he runs around the city until everything is bathed in orange and sepia tones, making the city look like its from an ancient Fontainian kamera reel.

It makes him wonder what sunsets are like in distant lands he's only ever read about in stories or accounts from the vast temple library, like Snezhnaya or Inazuma.

After a long day of organizing the old Temple of Silence office at the Akademiya, Sethos slips through the House of Daena and out the back door onto a large branch of the Great Tree. From here, he can see distant trees in the setting sun cast shadows over the spires of Alcazarzaray. Despite gathering clouds in the east and grey curtains of rain falling across the Mawtiyima Forest on the horizon, Sethos swings his legs over the edge of the branch and takes out another lunchbox that Mairamou had shoved into his hands earlier that morning.

He hasn't had time to eat until now.

The warm spice of harra fruit paste tingles on his tongue, making his mouth water despite it already being filled with fried pastry and fish. Sethos eats slowly, repeating to himself various landmarks and places on the horizon.

He's still learning where everything is in the rainforest. Where the desert had been easy to navigate, the signs and paths second-nature to him, Sethos still has trouble with the different forests and Sumeru City buildings.

Pulling out a guide that Cyno had given him — courtesy of Tighnari — Sethos turns to the page on Mawtiyama and begins reading, taking care to not let any of the oil on his fingers from the fish roll soil the pages of this worn copy of the Avidya Forest Survival Guide.

Cyno had told him that it was an older version, with Tighnari's apologies and promise to give him an updated one the next time they meet, but Sethos almost prefers this copy. Tighnari's notes are in the margins along with some small doodles and a rougher script that Sethos thinks is Collei's. Tapping his fingers on the page, he traces part of the map from the Palace of Alcazarzaray to Mawtiyima behind it and then looks up to commit what he can see in the distance to memory.

"The errand-boy's come running all the way to the Akademiya," a snide voice says from above him, nearly startling Sethos into falling over the edge of the branch. "Quite the busy little bee, aren't you?"

Sethos doesn't know how he didn't hear the usual tinkling of bells or see the scraps of blue fabric but when he looks up he sees Hat Guy perched above him, expression pinched and irritated.

"I'm just here for lunch — someone gave me this." Holding up the half-empty lunchbox, Sethos smiles, hoping that it puts the other man at ease. "Want some?"

Hat Guy scoffs and shakes his head, the bells on the ends of his hat jingling loudly.

"I'd say you're no errand boy at all," he adds, sneering at Sethos. "You've got a more important role."

Sethos recognizes a threat when he hears one.

A fleeting sense of pride washes over him and he kicks his legs through the air again, swinging them off of the side of the branch. In making this thinly-veiled jab at Sethos being more than the derisive moniker of "Errand Boy," Hat Guy has somehow observed Sethos as something else.

Something more.

Even if he no longer has a Ba Fragment.

It's not like Hermanubis ever spoke to him directly, even when Sethos had called upon the sage's power. And he still has his bow and his electro vision and years of training, even if that training is now in service of something else.

Something Sethos hasn't quite figured out yet.

He genuinely loves running errands.

He doesn't want to be well-known, like General Mahamatra Cyno, the true bearer of Hermanubis.

He wants desperately to help others and yet, Hat Guy's words cut deeper than Sethos had initially realized. Sethos bites his lip to stop himself from unwisely snapping back angrily. He's not actually mad at Hat Guy and Hat Guy—

"Foolish."

"You'll make yourself ill."

Remembering Hat Guy's derisive tone at the café, Sethos closes his eyes and imagines he saw something else — concern, curiosity, interest — in Hat Guy's expression that day.

"I'd say that you're no student either," Sethos finally responds, thinking of how Hat Guy moves, all innate grace and uncanny beauty.

There's something about Hat Guy that draws Sethos' eye, even when the dark-haired messenger is doing his best to stay out of sight.

"You've got a more important role," he adds.

In mimicking Hat Guy's threat, Sethos had intended to tease the Vahumana student. Instead it comes out painfully and embarrassingly sincere, the lunchbox still thrust into the air between them, Sethos' arms outstretched and open.

"Tch."

Hat Guy ducks his head and makes a disgusted noise and leaps from the branch above, disappearing in a rush of flowing blue and a chiming sound.

***

Sethos doesn't mean to eavesdrop.

He really doesn't.

The blond-haired architect is talking in what Sethos is certain he believes to be a hushed whisper. Unfortunately, the architect is also quite drunk, unaware of how his voice carries throughout the entire tavern.

Sethos hears Kaveh well before he sets foot on the stairs and Kaveh's voice only increases in volume and passion as Sethos makes his way up to the second floor of Lambad's Tavern, where Kaveh appears to be holding an impromptu architecture class.

A bright sheen of sweat shines on Kaveh's forehead and the feather in his hair seems to move with every exclamation he makes. Taking a large draught of wine, Kaveh wipes the spare ruby-coloured droplets with the back of his glove and breathes in deeply, only to interrupt himself with a muted hiccup that causes him to sway where he's standing on a chair.

"Take the example of the Dripping Verdant Light!"

Kaveh waves his hands in the air in an approximation of the light fixture for specific emphasis. "Beautiful and designed spef—

specifically for Sumeru forests, able to run entirely on bioluminescent plant matter while blending in not only to the existing architecture but also into the aesthetics of the surrounding villages, all while remaining unobtrusive and fully-operational!"

Captivated, Sethos makes his way to the bar without taking his eyes off of Kaveh, who continues to essentially give a Kshahrewar elective lecture while intoxicated, somehow managing to only slur his words once or twice.

Behind Kaveh, a brown-haired Kshahrewar student yells something unintelligible but supportive, raising his wooden goblet in Kaveh's direction.

"He's always like this," the bartender tells him as Sethos hands over the basket of zaytun peaches he had been tasked with delivering from the fruit stall down by the docks.

"I've heard he has a lot of fans at the Akademiya," she continues with a wistful sigh that makes Sethos think that she too is one of them. "It's not hard to see why even though he's kind of a mess. Always has his partner pay his tab. Speaking of."

She busies herself with putting away the peaches, tossing her long dark hair in the direction of Akademiya Scribe Alhaitham who has entered the bar with a deep-set scowl on his face and is now standing in front of Kaveh, arms crossed in front of his chest menacingly.

"Alhaitham!" Kaveh's smile is bright and genuine, his cheeks flushing an even deeper red colour at the sight of the scribe. "You're just in time to hear me talk about the beginning of our shared thesis, starting with—"

"You've been out long enough."

Alhaitham's voice is stern, with a slight tone of possessiveness that sets Sethos on edge, even from where he's standing at the bar. Kaveh seems to agree with Sethos' quick assessment because he mirrors Alhaitham's pose, looking down on the Akademiya Scribe, aided by the fact that Kaveh is still standing on a chair.

Sethos supposes Kaveh had done this as a makeshift way to establish himself as a lecturer to the crowd of Akademiya students gathered around him. With Alhaitham now glaring up at Kaveh, the entire scene is a bit ridiculous and Sethos covers his giggle with his hand.

The bartender gives him a knowing grin.

“I don’t have to listen to you,” Kaveh says.

Pulling out a keyring from his trousers pocket, Alhaitham makes a show of twirling it around his fingertips, a small stuffed lion charm dangling in the air off of the end of it. “You don’t, but you might not be able to get into the house.”

“You!”

Jumping to the ground with surprising elegance that earns him a smattering of drunken applause from tavern onlookers, Kaveh leans into Alhaitham’s space until their noses are nearly touching.

Sethos suddenly understands.

Naturally, he’s heard rumours about the two. Running errands lends itself to hearing gossip and the aunties and uncles of Treasures Street are more than willing to tell Sethos what they know.

Yet, seeing the two of them person is something else entirely — different than the quiet intimacy of Cyno and Tighnari that Sethos had accidentally stumbled into, but no less affecting.

It’s as if they’ve forgotten that anyone else in the room exists — including the sizable and captive audience of researchers filling the second floor of Lambad’s — save the other.

Where Tighnari and Cyno had been soft and warm with each other in private, like Sethos’ grandparents, Kaveh and Alhaitham are sharp edges that somehow fit together, almost blinding in their passion. Despite their escalating argument, Sethos sees a bared concern for Kaveh in Alhaitham’s eyes and the performance of anger in Kaveh’s increasingly-wild gestures.

Sethos finds that he can’t look away from them.

Briefly, he wonders what it would feel like for someone else to look at him with that kind of intensity.

***

Settling into his life in Sumeru City, Sethos finds himself returning to that same branch just outside of the House of Daena often to eat a late lunch or supper after he’s finished his work or run out of errands and

tasks to do. It not only has a good view of the rainforests around the city, but also gives him ample time to relax and watch as people go about their daily lives.

This particular afternoon, a Spantamad student staggers out the door into the light, blinking at the brightness of the sun before muttering to himself about how his ley line project isn't going as planned. A moment later, a researcher with a Kshahrewar pin attached to his hat stumbles out after him, handing him a stack of papers that the Spantamad student had presumably left behind.

Sethos envies the Akademiya students at times.

They're allowed to lack purpose or even change their concentration in a way that he was never allowed to be at the temple — and still isn't now, even without Hermanubis — although Sethos is certain that nearly all Akademiya researchers would bristle at this assessment.

Holding out his hand, Sethos studies the black bracers on his forearm, worn and scarred from countless bowstring hits. Curling his fingertips, he tries to draw upon the power of Hermanubis, seeking the heady rush of energy pulsing through his body in tandem with his electro vision.

Nothing happens save the purple glow of electro in the palm of his hand. Making a fist, he disperses the electric spark into the humid air, where it crackles loudly before dissipating into the trees.

Sethos had known that nothing would happen but it still stings.

He doesn't understand how something that had been a part of him for so long can just disappear that quickly, despite knowingly giving his power to Cyno.

"Taking another break, Errand Boy? The rumours never painted you as lazy but you shouldn't believe everything you hear."

This time the acerbic voice comes from directly beside him and Sethos jumps again, earning a smirk from Hat Guy who sits down a few metres away from him on the same branch.

"If only there were more rumours about you, Hat Guy, I'd be able to come up with a stronger rebuttal."

"Tch."

Sethos fully expects Hat Guy to leave after snorting in obvious disgust — either at Sethos' perceived laziness or the existence of Sethos entirely, just like at Puspa Café, Sethos isn't sure what specifically has disgusted Hat Guy — and turns his attention back to his half-eaten food, waiting for the telltale sign of rustling fabric and tinkling bells signifying Hat Guy's departure.

He hears the bells but only as the breeze picks up, causing the ribbons trailing from behind Hat Guy's large wooden namesake to flutter like a wind chime.

The air between them grows increasingly heavy as Sethos wonders why Hat Guy isn't leaving.

"Tell me about etiology," Sethos finally blurts out when the tension becomes too much for him to bear.

"What?"

"You're in Vahumana, so you must be studying something in etiology or related to it. Tell me about it."

As he says this, Sethos realizes that unlike every other Akademiya student he's met or observed, Hat Guy hasn't talked about his studies once. When he dares to look to his left, Sethos is shocked to find that Hat Guy's expression is closer to one of surprise than anger, as if no one has ever asked Hat Guy about his studies before.

Steeling his expression back into a sour smirk, Hat Guy bites at his lower lip.

"Tell me about the Temple of Silence."

Sethos shrugs. "What do you want to know?"

"You would really tell me?

Shrugging again, Sethos watches spots of sun and shadow move across the black leather of his bracer as the wind rustles through the leaves above them.

"There's no reason to keep it a secret anymore," he says. "I want to work more closely with the Akademiya and knowledge is often more useful when shared."

"Your optimism lacks self-preservation."

“Probably, but I can take care of myself.”

Hat Guy makes another dissatisfied noise and Sethos half-expects the Vahumana messenger to berate him for his foolishness like he had in the rain at Puspa Café. When he doesn’t, Sethos grins to himself and pushes the half-eaten lunchbox in Hat Guy’s direction.

It’s a less-direct offering than before but Sethos is still surprised when Hat Guy actually takes him up on it, reaching over tentatively at first and then moving his arm so quickly that Sethos doesn’t see how the fish roll actually goes from the oil-soaked paper inside the lunchbox into Hat Guy’s mouth.

Curling his legs under the edge of the branch, Sethos tilts his head back and closes his eyes.

Hat Guy chews loudly. It’s completely at odds with the otherworldly grace that Hat Guy seems to have when doing anything else and Sethos finds himself suppressing a giggle.

Swallowing, Hat Guy makes a small noise that indicates neither approval nor disapproval.

“Does it taste like anything at all to you?”

Sethos can’t help but ask. Hat Guy’s conversation with Lesser Lord Kusanali had made it seem like Hat Guy didn’t need to eat at all, but that can’t possibly be true.

“Yes.”

“Good?”

“…yes. Could use less sugar.”

“I’ll let Mairamou know,” Sethos says, his heart and body suddenly feeling impossibly light as he swings his feet in the air over the city.

Chapter End Notes

> You may have noticed the chapter count jump up to four. Whoops. These two have a lot more to say than I initially thought so right now it's looking like a solid four chapters plus any small one-offs from Scara's POV like rain for the first chapter.
>
> Hope you enjoyed and thank you for reading!

am I the only one?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You are, without a doubt, one of the most infuriating people I have ever known!”

Sethos laughs loudly.

The recipient of the insult, Akademiya Scribe Alhaitham, smirks and crosses his arms over his chest, posturing aggressively over the corner table he’s sharing with Kaveh, who had shouted the odd insult at a volume ensuring that everyone in Lambad’s would hear him.

From where he stands at the the counter waiting for the titular owner to bring him an order of charcoal-baked ajilenakh cake, Sethos has given up on pretending that he’s not listening to their argument. The rest of the tavern’s patrons seem to have done the same.

He expects Alhaitham to eventually say something in response — a dry sarcastic comment that’s far more insulting than anything Sethos has heard Kaveh come up with in the few times he’s seen the two together — but Alhaitham simply stares as Kaveh’s face grows progressively redder until his cheeks are nearly purple.

“Every time they come in,” Lambad says, shaking his head.

Looking away from Kaveh, who has begun spluttering something incoherent directly into Alhaitham’s face, Sethos waits for Lambad to finish whatever he was going to say. Lambad just keeps shaking his head in a chiding manner, despite his obvious amusement.

Sethos has less than a second to react before Lambad is shoving a plate piled high with fresh cakes.

The scent of roasted ajilenakh nuts wafts up from the small blackened cakes, fresh from the oven and still steaming. A small cup of jam sits next to them and Sethos can almost taste the sourness just from looking at the bright red of the crushed henna berries.

Like Mairamou’s soup, it reminds him of home.

And his grandfather.

A familiar pang shoots through his chest but it's different this time, and has been for a bit. It's less immediate and more dull, quickly giving way to feeling that's more bittersweet than it is painful.

Thanking Lambad, Sethos turns back towards his own table, where Cyno is seated and waiting for him. When Sethos plunks the plate down, Cyno looks up from where he had been studying two Genius Invokation cards in his hands with a calculating expression.

Despite Sethos being in Sumeru City for some time, Cyno hadn't reached out until recently and when he had, it had been with a stilted and overly-formal letter. Sethos had finally responded with a hopefully friendlier message via dusk bird accepting Cyno's invitation to lunch.

"I think Cyno would help you too, if you let him. You're a bit like family already."

Idly, Tighnari's words flit through Sethos' thoughts and he ducks his head, blushing as he remembers the last time they spoke.

He wonders if Cyno knows about his fleeting crush on Tighnari — wonders how Cyno would feel about it.

Placing the cards into his pocket, Cyno blinks slowly and reaches for a cake, patting it first with the tips of his fingers to see if it's cool enough to eat. Once he's satisfied with the temperature, Cyno shoves half of it into his mouth unceremoniously and quickly swallows.

"Sometimes I think about how I should lighten the mood around me," Cyno says gravely.

Shocked that Cyno is asking him for advice before they've even gone through the perfunctory and potentially awkward greetings of seeing each other for the first time since he visited Gandharva Ville, Sethos leans forward eagerly.

"Let me know if I can help," he says, following Cyno's lead by tapping the hard outer crust of the ajilenakh cake before picking it up off of the plate and breaking it in half. Crumbs scatter across Sethos' side of the table and he watches as the corner of Cyno's mouth twitches.

"I was going to tell a cake joke, but it was a little half-baked."

Keeping his eyes on Sethos, Cyno reaches for another cake and plops the entire thing in his mouth this time. His cheeks puff out like a

child, at-odds with his overly-serious expression.

Sethos doesn't know how to respond so he laughs nervously.

"Because you bake a cake," Cyno tells him after an awkward silence settles over their table, the ambient noise from Lambad's lunch rush and Kaveh's yelling above it all filling the air between them. "And half-baked can mean actually half-baked, like an underbaked cake, but also can mean an unfinished idea or thought process."

"Yeah I…understood you the first time," Sethos says, confused as to why Cyno thinks he needs any sort of explanation.

Growing up in the Temple of Silence meant that he's still somewhat sheltered but it wasn't that bad. And he's been living in Sumeru City for a while now running errands and getting used to city life.

Surely he doesn't stick out that much anymore.

"I do try to lighten the mood sometimes, but—" Cyno shakes his head and hums, visibly frustrated. "I'm not the best judge of other people's sense of humor."

"Oh, it was just a joke?" Sethos says aloud somewhat thoughtlessly. Despite hearing Cyno's odd jokes in Gandharva Ville, Sethos had attributed it to being comfortable with Tighnari and Collei and not a usual part of Cyno's personality.

Cyno hums and nods and dips one end of his cake into the henna berry jam. "Tighnari doesn't like it when I tell too many but he's not here right now. He doesn't enjoy listening to my explanations either."

Somehow the same Cyno who bested him in a duel, the Akademiya's feared General Mahamatra who accepted the whole of Hermanubis with all of the necessary grace and gravity, and said that he would take care of Sethos in Sumeru, is now pouting in a public place at the idea of his partner interrupting his terrible jokes.

Sethos laughs. He hides his mouth behind his hand when Cyno glares at him but there's no heat or anger in Cyno's face and Sethos keeps laughing.

"You're a lot different off-duty than all of the rumours suggest," he says as his giggles slowly subside under Cyno's scrutiny.

Cyno opens his mouth to say something but is immediately

interrupted by the scraping of a chair against the floor and a loud yell from Kaveh.

“I’ve told you time and again that I do not need your so-called help!”

Gesturing at Alhaitham so his red cape swirls around him dramatically, Kaveh turns his nose up with a put-upon sigh and slams his hand down onto their table, nearly upending his cup of water.

Sethos thinks of what the bartender upstairs had said the last time he had seen Kaveh. “They really are like this all the time, hunh?”

It’s not a question that Sethos expects an answer to, but Cyno sighs loudly in response. Looking both embarrassed to be in the same room as them and sternly disapproving, Cyno shakes his head. His jackal hood sways a bit before sliding forward on his face, nearly blocking his eyes completely.

“I don’t listen to them on purpose…” Sethos quickly adds. He doesn’t want Cyno to think that he’s watching them as entertainment, although it’s difficult not to once they’re arguing in front of him and the entirety of Lambad’s.

“They make it difficult for anyone to not listen,” Cyno says dryly while waving at the two of them from across the tavern.

The smugness in Alhaitham’s expression remains as he nods in Cyno’s direction while Kaveh’s face brightens. Some of the redness fades from Kaveh’s cheeks as Kaveh gives them an enthusiastic wave that Sethos can’t help but return while Cyno lets out a small amused noise, nodding back before returning to his coffee.

“They’re just like that,” Cyno adds. He doesn’t look back in their direction but tilts his shoulder slightly to direct Sethos’ attention and when Sethos turns his head Alhaitham and Kaveh have already resumed their argument, albeit more quietly as Alhaitham drags Kaveh over to a corner table far away from other patrons.

“Pretty different than you and Tighnari, hunh?” Sethos says, again without much thought until his own words catch up with him. Before he can apologize to Cyno for talking about his relationship aloud — especially when Cyno hasn’t directly confirmed it in front of him at all — Cyno makes a disgusted face and shakes his head so violently that the jackal hood nearly falls off.

“Very different.”

Another slightly-less-but-still-uncomfortable silence settles between them. Sethos watches as Kaveh and Alhaitham leave — still arguing but with Alhaitham's hand conspicuously in the back pocket of Kaveh's loose-fitting trousers — and his mind drifts from them to Cyno and Tighnari and then, inexplicably, Hat Guy.

"Do you know 'Hat Guy?'"

Cyno looks up at him over the rim of his mug of coffee. His bright orange eyes are knowing but he asks anyway. "Hat Guy?"

Gesturing above his head widely in an approximation of Hat Guy's hat, Sethos sits back in his chair. "Yeah, the Vahumana scholar who always wears a giant hat like this. He runs errands sometimes."

"I know who you're talking about. I met him during the Interdarshan Championship."

A worried look flickers across Cyno's face and quickly hardens into a more serious and thoughtful expression.

"I don't know where he came from," Cyno muses, more to himself than to Sethos directly, "but he doesn't seem to be a bad guy."

His voice grows a bit harsher and deeper and Sethos takes this to mean that Cyno's lack of information clearly bothers him. It makes sense. Cyno is the General Mahamatra. There's likely little he's not able to find about someone if he really wants to.

Their conversation grows less stilted. They polish off the plate of charcoal-baked ajilenakh cakes while Cyno tells him all about the Interdarshan Championship and Sethos follows the story eagerly, gasping in spite of himself. By the end of the night, Cyno looks pleased, a rare and small grin flashing across his face as they go their separate ways down Treasures Street.

It's not until much later, when Sethos stares at a spider idly spinning a web in the corner of his ceiling — he should take a broom to it but doesn't have the heart to displace the spider and the mosquitos in Sumeru City are awful — unable to sleep, that he realizes this was probably Cyno's way of looking out for him.

"You're a bit like family already." Sethos hears again in Tighnari's voice.

He squints at the cobweb in the dark and smiles.

***

The second time he has lunch with Hat Guy, he's approximately ninety-percent sure that it's not a coincidence.

If Sethos were a betting man, he would bet that Hat Guy had approached him purposefully — had even, potentially, learned enough of Sethos' routine to find Sethos in this particular spot.

It's also no less weird than the first time Hat Guy had decided to stick around and awkwardly eat a fish roll.

Sun warm and pleasant on his face through the shadows, Sethos leans back against the trunk of the Great Tree and closes his eyes. The desert sun is much harsher but also much warmer. Sometimes he misses it and the drier air with a ferocity that brings tears to his eyes when he's alone and has time to think about how far away from home he is now. Swallowing, he tilts his head back even more until face is completely turned towards the sun.

Above him, the leaves rustle in the wind, casting a firmer shadow over his face. He can feel a slight chill settling around him with the breeze and see the darkness, even through closed eyelids. Annoyed, he opens his eyes and nearly jumps when he sees that the shadow isn't from the leaves at all but from Hat Guy, staring down at him with a sneer.

"Hello," Sethos says, startled by Hat Guy's sudden appearance.

"I don't appreciate everyone calling me 'Hat Guy' because of you," he says, dark blue-eyes narrowed with scorn.

"How do you know it's because of me? Cyno told me that the Traveller and their companion called you that at the Interdarshan Championship."

Hat Guy jumps down onto the branch next to him. The movement is so graceful it almost seems inhuman and Sethos can't help but stare.

"I talked with Mairamou," he says.

This explains nothing.

"She told you that I call you Hat Guy?"

Eyebrow twitching angrily, presumably at Sethos using the nickname at all, Hat Guy nods.

Sethos hums.

“Her soup really is the best, right?”

Scowling, Hat Guy crosses his arms over his chest and taps the fabric-wrapped lunchbox sitting between them. “Have you been going to the wrong stall? She sells these fish rolls.”

“She sells a soup too,” Sethos says, hoping that Mairamou will forgive him for letting Hat Guy in on her secret. It may have just been a request for Sethos specifically. “An ajilenakh nut soup that…reminds me of home.”

Hat Guy either doesn’t note Sethos’ stumble or purposefully ignores it, his frown deepening. “I’ve told you I don’t need food, anyway,” he says, immediately contradicting this statement somewhat as his eyes dart to the lunchbox hungrily.

“Right,” Sethos responds, as if this entire conversation makes perfect sense and Hat Guy’s continued and seemingly voluntary presence next to him isn’t at all confusing.

To Sethos’ surprise, Hat Guy doesn’t ask Sethos to stop calling him that.

He also doesn’t tell Sethos his actual name.

Shaking his head, Sethos unknots the fabric and taps the closed top of the lunchbox. “So I got you hooked on her fish rolls, hunh? I knew there had to be something you’d enjoy eating enough to continue!”

He still doesn’t how Hat Guy’s presumed aversion to food works. Hat Guy can eat but he doesn’t seem particularly used to the idea and Hat Guy proves this to Sethos again moments later when he begins chewing loudly on a fish roll that Sethos hands him.

“They’re different,” Hat Guy says through a mouth of food.

“Close your mouth when you chew.”

It comes out more amused than annoyed and Sethos sends Hat Guy a bright grin. Hat Guy’s a messy eater too. Crumbs from the fried flaky outside of the fish roll fall all over Hat Guy’s clothes, standing out against his black turtleneck and hakama shorts. There’s oil and more crumbs on his lips and Sethos can’t help but watch as Hat Guy’s pink tongue darts out and misses half of them. He chews noisily and

swallows loudly and Sethos stares and notes how his skin appears to be poreless and inexplicably smooth.

Still, it's the least perfect Sethos has ever seen him.

"They're less sweet."

"Are they?"

Sethos had eaten earlier so he hasn't had a chance to try any of the fish rolls that Mairamou had shoved at him eagerly that morning. He supposes this explains the knowing glint in her eye.

"You told her. She listened."

"Of course she did." Confused at how Mairamou knew he was going to see Hat Guy that day, and also why Hat Guy sounds so incredulous, Sethos twists his fingers in the fabric that had previously been wrapped around the lunchbox absentmindedly. "Why would she want to make something you didn't like?"

"Tch."

Hat Guy wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, leaving a trail of oil and crumbs on his glove.

***

It becomes their routine — eating together.

Sethos closes his eyes and allows the sun and heat to wash over him as he leans back against the Great Tree in his usual spot, overlooking the back entrance to the Akademiya's House of Daena.

It's a bit cooler today and Sethos relishes it, even as he nearly shivers, beads of sweat cold against his skin as they dry. A now-predictable shadow falls over him and Sethos keeps his eyes shut, waiting for Hat Guy to inevitably make a sarcastic comment about his appearance or so-called laziness.

It never comes but the shadow stays.

Sethos waits.

The shadow doesn't move so he knows that it's either Hat Guy or a particularly daring Rishboland Tiger and tigers don't come this far into the city.

Curious, Sethos opens one eye and then the other, letting out a small huff of laughter at Hat Guy's intense stare. Hat Guy doesn't even seem to register that Sethos is no longer pretending to sleep, watching for something somewhere into the distance beyond Sethos' body despite the fact that his eyes are trained almost directly onto Sethos' scarf. The corners of his mouth are turned up awkwardly, like Hat Guy's body doesn't quite know how to move his lips into a smiling position.

Hat Guy is almost grinning.

He's beautiful.

"Did you kill someone, Hat Guy?"

Blinking, Hat Guy glares even more intensely down past Sethos, the bells on the ends of his hat tinkling quietly in the breeze. After another moment, he blinks again, shaking his head slightly. His face falls into its usual frown as he finally looks at Sethos directly.

"I'm trying to figure out a way to get rid of you so I can go commit atrocities."

He sounds so intense that Sethos can't help but laugh. Patting the tree branch, Sethos sticks his tongue out a bit as he smiles up at Hat Guy, noting how Hat Guy follows the movement with his eyes.

"You'll have to try a lot harder than that."

Hat Guy jumps down with an annoyed grunt, all chiming bells and rustling fabric despite his unnaturally-refined manner. He lands precisely next to the lunchbox, which Sethos had already unwrapped when he had eaten a few fish rolls earlier that afternoon while running errands around the city.

Briefly, Sethos wonders if Hat Guy has ever considered becoming a dancer and nearly asks, only holding himself back by imagining how much it could potentially insult Hat Guy and cause him to leave.

He doesn't want to lose this, whatever it is.

"You lack self-preservation," Hat Guy tells him, staring off into the distance again.

Something seems to be bothering Hat Guy but Sethos doesn't know him well enough to ask about it and Hat Guy, of all people Sethos has met since coming to Sumeru City, seems like he would be the least

receptive to Sethos' usual nosiness.

Sliding the lunchbox towards Hat Guy, Sethos shrugs and looks down at the rooftops of the Akademiya buildings. They're more neatly-organized but less interesting-looking than what Sethos is used to. Desert homes are based on whatever rock formations and dunes are around and most of them are, if not underground completely then, grown from the desert itself in a way. Even Aaru Village, most of which is above-ground, is set in the sides of a deep valley.

Sethos doesn't have a particularly discerning eye — and will fully admit his own biases if ever asked — but he likes the desert style better. Even if the people and noise make Sumeru City feel homey, the buildings all look eerily uniform.

Beneath them, students pour out of the House of Daena, a sign that it's almost suppertime. As he watches a Spantamad student that he doesn't recognize playfully push a Haravatat student — Gregor, which would likely make the Spantamad student Wenjie, the Liyue transfer student who Gregor drinks with sometimes as they both reminisce about their home countries — into some bushes. Wenjie retaliates by elbowing Gregor sharply in the back.

"You were smiling," Sethos says softly, feeling his face heat up a bit at the memory. "It was terrifying. I thought that Mahamatra Cyno would be jumping down to arrest you at any moment!"

Hat Guy scoffs and looks down at the crowd of students as they separate where the paths fork off to each Darshan's dormitories. He doesn't look mad, his chin thrust out sharply in what on any other person Sethos would say is embarrassment.

But Hat Guy has never shown signs of embarrassment or guilt or many emotions beyond varying types of anger and, on the rare occasion, a contemplative melancholy that Sethos doesn't understand and also hasn't asked about.

Sethos holds out his hands in an attempt to stave off Hat Guy's irritation.

"No need to get offended oh mighty Hat Guy, it was just weird to see you smiling like that. It was…nice."

Sneering, Hat Guy makes a disdainful noise before shoving another entire fish roll into his mouth.

Hat Guy presumably never had anyone constantly telling him how rude it was to chew with his mouth open or eat entire foods whole or chomp loudly.

Sethos doesn't say anything else, content to watch Hat Guy eat.

Despite Hat Guy's perfect skin and uncanny eyes and lips, the most awkward Sethos ever sees Hat Guy look across the now many times they've run into each other is when he's eating. Hat Guy works his jaw almost sideways like a sumpter beast and doesn't seem to understand that he can take small bites instead of shoving everything into his mouth whole. There are crumbs all over Hat Guy's face again and Sethos' hands itch to wipe them off.

Tightening his fingers into fists at his side, Sethos clears his throat and coughs, embarrassed at his thoughts even if he hasn't acted on them.

Hat Guy looks at Sethos, fish roll still stuffed in his cheeks, and narrows his eyes.

Quickly looking away, Sethos casts his eyes back towards the groups of researchers milling around outside the House of Daena. He gives Sasani a quick wave, which she returns with a tired smile.

"She's late on finishing up her thesis presentation," he says, pointing to Sasani who has now begun measuring the stained-glass window closest to the exit for some reason.

Half-expecting Hat Guy to ask him why this matters at all, Sethos looks back up when he hears nothing but the ambient chatter below. Hat Guy swallows and Sethos follows the motion of Hat Guy's throat as it moves.

"That one's working on puzzle mechanisms." Sethos points directly at Taha when Hat Guy still doesn't say anything. "But he's stuck on his thesis too because he insulted Madam Faruzan and she's refused to work with him again."

"Stupid," Hat Guy says, voice quiet and low.

From what little he knows of Faruzan, Sethos is inclined to agree.

They spend the rest of the evening like this — Sethos pointing at random scholars he's met in passing while running errands in the city and telling Hat Guy about them while Hat Guy nods or shakes his head or makes small noises of either curiosity or disgust.

It’s the best time Sethos has had since moving to Sumeru City.

Just before the sun sets, a surprisingly comfortable silence lingers between them.

When he closes his eyes and leans back against the trunk of the Great Tree again, Sethos idly thinks about what it would be like to have what Alhaitham and Kaveh have and shudders.

Then he thinks about what it would be like to have what Cyno and Tighnari have and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Wanderer's POV of the final scene in this chapter can be found in another fic in this series: I still don't have any memories

If you've been following this from the beginning you may have recognized that this was extended to more chapters. It's definitely become much more of a slow burn kind of quiet ride. Right now it's looking like this will be six to seven total chapters but I changed the indicator to ? so it's not misleading until I have a better idea of how many chapters this will be.

Thank you so much for reading!

was everyone else happy?

Chapter Notes

Got caught up in some work stuff but we're back!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In his admittedly short time in Sumeru City, Sethos hasn't stopped by the Akademiya much. Cyno hadn't seemed too annoyed when Sethos had told him this — responding with a nod and an interested hum that probably promised at least a partial personal investigation of what Sethos had actually been up to — but had also reminded Sethos that his initial invitation to Sumeru City had come from the Akademiya. There is a lot that the Akademiya can learn from the archives at the Temple of Silence and vice versa.

"And Lesser Lord Kusanali has been asking after you. You should message her at your earliest convenience."

Sethos is smart enough to know that this wasn't an optional request.

The day after he talks to Cyno, he schedules a meeting with Lesser Lord Kusanali.

"You should call me Nahida," she says as she unlocks the door to the Temple of Silence office at the Akademiya. "It's much easier. And to be quite honest, although my childlike looks are deceiving in terms of my knowledge, my experience as an Archon is limited."

"My experience as the Temple of Silence's leader is limited," Sethos admits with a sheepish smile.

Truthfully, his grandfather had run it for so long he can't imagine anyone else doing the same. He still doesn't even consider himself its leader yet, despite being given the title. The few days he had spent at the Temple afterwards had admittedly been awkward with everyone treating him as the leader and Sethos not knowing how to deal with their reverence.

Especially having just lost his grandfather and Hermanubis and a duel against the General Mahamatra within the span of a day.

Nahida grins and claps her hands before gesturing around room. "Excellent. Then we can learn together."

Sethos has only been here one other time — when Lesser Lord Kusanali had initially showed him the office a few days after arriving — but it's only slightly more organized and less dusty than he remembers it being when he had first seen it. They really didn't get much done beyond introductions that day.

"I've told you time and again that I have no need for food," Hat Guy says. The papers Sethos and Nahida had been organizing flutter to the floor when Hat Guy slams a cloth-covered lunchbox onto the desk.

Sethos coughs at the dust that rises in the air, watching the papers slowly drift onto the worn carpet. When he lifts his eyes up towards Hat Guy, he can't stop staring.

"Stop trying to help me," Hat Guy says angrily, pointing at Nahida.

Shaking her head at Sethos, Nahida lifts her hand.

"What if I was to tell you that I'm practicing cooking?"

"Hmph. If you were, then I think you should waste your results on someone else."

Hat Guy looks at Sethos next, staring at him intensely before ducking his head underneath the wide brim of his hat. "Sorry for the interruption," he says.

"Don't mind him," Nahida tells Sethos with a disapproving click of her tongue. "He doesn't mean any harm."

That day had also marked Sethos' first encounter with Hat Guy.

"What do you know about Hat Guy?" he asks Nahida as he flips through an old book. The leather cover is peeling off and a few loose papers fall out when he blows on it to get rid of the thick layer of dust that has settled on the outside. He tries to sound nonchalant as he asks but ends up coughing from the cloud of dust that rises off of the pages.

Nahida taps her finger against her chin thoughtfully. It's obvious that she's thinking of how best to say something that she either doesn't know or isn't her story to tell. She's interesting and doesn't act at all what Sethos had expected from an Archon.

"If you want to know about him, you should ask him yourself," she says not unkindly but firmly, still tapping her chin. "If I was to say

anything, it would be that he once achieved his greatest ambition."

It tells Sethos nothing and only piques his curiosity even further.

He laughs.

"Sounds like quite the story."

"I imagine it is," she says, "but I wouldn't actually know. I do have reason to believe that he's happier now than he ever was previously."

"Why's that?"

Sethos can't help but ask. He thinks that Hat Guy has been more relaxed around him lately but with Hat Guy's prickly personality it's difficult to actually know.

"Ask him," Nahida says, a wry grin on her face. "I think he would answer."

She seems certain of this, her hands now on her hips in confident fashion and her nose tipped up in the air. Impressed by how commanding she is, even while resembling a child, Sethos chuckles and picks up another dusty book.

"Can I ask you a question then?"

Tilting her head to the side curiously, Nahida frowns. "You didn't have a problem asking me about Hat Guy."

"This is a more serious question. I need some advice," he admits.

Nahida nods, still frowning. "I think I'm good at asking the right questions and giving good answers, this includes advice. As the Archon of Wisdom, it's part of my job to guide you."

"Right," Sethos says. Nahida's response already touches on what he wants to ask her, but doesn't exactly know how to phrase the question. "What do you think makes a good leader?"

She narrows her eyes and studies him, grey eyebrows furrowed in thought. The green of her pupils seems to glow in the low light of the office and Sethos briefly wonders if she's reading his mind.

After a few minutes of silence, Sethos starts babbling nervously.

"Like I said before, my experience as a leader is limited. Some of the

Temple of Silence elders were not happy when I was chosen and think I'll be too difficult for them to control."

Something in Nahida's expression shifts, green eyes flashing even brighter. Before Sethos can ask her about it, the emotion vanishes and Nahida gestures for him to continue.

"I'm not as worried about that as I am about, well, leading," he admits. "After losing in the Rite of Duels to Cyno, I at least know where I will never compromise but everything else? I really don't know—"

Nahida holds her hand up and Sethos closes his mouth, his teeth clacking against each other audibly.

"What do you want from the Akademiya as a collaborative partner?"

The question catches Sethos off-guard. It hadn't been what he had expected Nahida to ask and he doesn't have a definitive answer prepared.

He probably should have thought more about this before asking.

More importantly, he should have thought more about this before taking a meeting with Nahida at all.

"You don't have to know the answer now," Nahida says as if she is actually reading his mind. "I simply thought it would be an easier beginning than trying to justify your entire leadership style upfront."

"I want to talk to the sages directly," Sethos says. He's had more than a few frustrating conversations with Akademiya researchers who either haven't believed him when he's spoken about the Temple or his home or have "corrected" him from what they believe rather than believing Sethos' experience. "The Temple has a lot of research that the Akademiya is missing, but none of it will help if researchers don't believe us or see us as lesser scholars."

"That is a very good place to start." Nahida smiles and nods approvingly.

***

Due to his late lunches — or early suppers — with Hat Guy, Sethos has visited the House of Daena at approximately the same time almost every day since he arrived in Sumeru City. The timing is just after

some of the larger lectures finish for the day and students from all Darshans pour out into the streets and go to the library for whatever they need. Sethos sits on a now very specific branch of the Great Tree and watches them until Hat Guy makes a condescending sound from one of the branches above him.

Today, Hat Guy seems a bit subdued — Hat Guy sits above Sethos but doesn't make a noise — and while Sethos waits he squints his eyes until the uniformed researchers blur together in a blocky, slow-moving pattern of greens and blues and greys.

"Why don't you wear an Akademiya uniform?" Sethos blurts out, shifting onto his back and using his arm like a pillow so he's looking directly up at Hat Guy.

It's not anywhere close to what Sethos wants to ask Hat Guy, but he knows that if Hat Guy gets used to Sethos peppering him with annoying and mundane questions, a more serious one later on when they know each other better won't come as much of a surprise.

He hopes.

Hat Guy glares down from the branch above Sethos. The sun will set in a few hours and isn't nearly as bright as it would be midday but still creates an odd halo effect around the brim of Hat Guy's hat when Sethos looks up, Hat Guy's face a dark silhouette by comparison.

"I don't want to."

Despite Hat Guy's usual brevity, Sethos was expecting more of an explanation than that — something like Hat Guy having an exception because of specific reasons that Sethos can't think up in the moment. He just knows that something about Hat Guy is exceptional, or maybe was exceptional.

Hat Guy is different than the other Akademiya students and he doesn't wear a uniform because of it.

One of the first times they'd spoken at the Great Tree, Hat Guy had said something cryptic about knowing that Sethos had a more important role than errand boy and Sethos had responded with something equally cryptic. The memory presses up against his brain painfully and Sethos feels himself getting annoyed at the idea that running errands isn't "enough" somehow even though —having talked to Hat Guy a lot more since then — he doesn't think that Hat Guy had meant much of anything beyond hinting at knowing who Sethos really

is.

Hat Guy smirks — probably because Sethos has been staring at him this entire time without saying anything in response — and crosses his arms over his chest as if he's just won an argument.

"Hunh."

Blinking, Sethos chews at his bottom lip in thought. It's a nervous habit that he's never been able to break. His lips are usually dry and chapped from the desert winds, even with the scarf he shifts over his face when he ventures out past the Temple into the sand dunes, and it makes it unfortunately easier to tear into them with his teeth.

"I thought it was mandatory," he adds.

Hat Guy's shoulders shift imperceptibly. For a moment, Hat Guy looks truly lost in thought and a bit confused.

It almost feels like Sethos is watching something he shouldn't, like Hat Guy doesn't know that his typical scowl has flattened into the contemplative look is on his face and that Sethos can see it.

"I can't imagine you with one," Sethos says, trying to keep his tone as lighthearted as possible. He stretches his arms out in front of him, positioning Hat Guy in the centre of his fingers like he's framing a photograph.

Hat Guy's dark blue hair falls in a curtain just above his eyes. The inside of his large hat is an even brighter blue that reminds Sethos of a clear day in the desert before the sandstorms inevitably kick up in the winds, obscuring the cloudless sky. Hat Guy tilts his head, scowl returning just as Sethos clicks his tongue, mimicking the sound of a kamera.

Inexplicably, an acute homesickness settles over Sethos. Lowering his hands, Sethos shakes his head and swallows, hoping that the feeling will go away soon.

"Tell me about the Temple of Silence."

The demand comes out of nowhere, referencing nothing that they've talked about at any of their meals together. Conversation is usually one-sided in Sethos' favour and the fact that Hat Guy has asked something of him makes his thoughts sputter a bit.

“You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to,” Hat Guy adds through gritted teeth. He picks at a loose piece of bark on the tree, forcibly removing it and sending a small shower of bark past where Sethos is lying and towards the path below. Sethos watches as Hat Guy grabs at his back undershirt, digging his nails into his own chest. It looks painful.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” Hat Guy chokes out.

Confused by Hat Guy’s sudden anger, Sethos sits up and studies Hat Guy for a moment. Hat Guy seems ready to bolt at the slightest provocation and Sethos has no idea what he did to make Hat Guy so uncomfortable.

“Sure,” he starts, because Hat Guy is right. He doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to, although he doesn’t know why it’s important for Hat Guy to say so. “I’m just surprised that you’re interested. You never ask me about, you know—”

Waving his arms, Sethos stumbles over his words, trying to make sure that he doesn’t say the wrong thing and anger Hat Guy so much that Hat Guy leaves.

“—personal stuff. The first time you asked me I thought it was because you were angry about me asking you about your studies.”

“It’s for a research project,” Hat Guy says as he jumps down. He lands next to Sethos on two feet with his usual poise. Sethos always notices how Hat Guy moves — doesn’t think he can stop noticing now because Hat Guy is too agile that it’s always unnerving.

That makes more sense than Hat Guy suddenly wanting to know more about Sethos personally, but something about the way that Hat Guy’s dark blue eyes are wide and open, the colour almost bleeding into his pupils, that gives Sethos pause.

“Sure,” Sethos repeats after another minute of Hat Guy’s staring. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s it like?”

“That’s your first question for a research project?” Sethos can’t help but laugh, both at the fact that Hat Guy is obviously just curious and the way that Hat Guy say it, as if he’s annoyed with the idea of asking a question at all.

Mumbling something incomprehensible under his breath — it almost sounds like a different language — Hat Guy scowls and ducks his head. The wide brim of his hat brushes against Sethos' hair.

Afraid that he's upset Hat Guy too much, Sethos opens his mouth to say that it's fine and launch into a broad description of the Temple buildings when he's immediately stopped by the terse sound of Hat Guy asking, "I heard you fought the General Mahamatra."

It's not at all what Sethos had expected Hat Guy to ask first.

"I did," he says, nodding slowly. "I lost."

"Tch."

Hat Guy bites down on his lower lip, chewing it so harshly that Sethos is surprised when it doesn't start to bleed.

"What was it like to…lose?"

"It, uh, wasn't fun," Sethos responds, puzzled by the ferocity of Hat Guy's sudden awkwardness. Hat Guy makes another bitter-sounding noise, his mouth turned down in a sullen pout. He seems to be trying to tell Sethos something, or ask him something, but Sethos doesn't know what.

"That's all you've got? Cyno's accusatory rasp echoes in Sethos' ears remembering the duel. *"What happened to searching for your answer?"*

Sethos nearly tells Hat Guy that it felt predetermined — like no matter what he did, Cyno was going to win regardless — but that doesn't capture the scope of how much Sethos truly had wanted to win. Or how devastating it had felt to lose.

"If I was to say anything, it would be that he once achieved his greatest ambition."

Sethos still has no idea what Nahida had meant when she said that, but he thinks it might have something to do with why Hat Guy is asking him these stilted questions about the duel and the Temple of Silence.

"I was outmatched in every aspect," Sethos finally says, tightening his fingers and then flexing them outward as if Hermanubis will somehow still come to him.

Hat Guy hums and, to Sethos' surprise, doesn't say anything else.

Another comfortable quiet settles over them, leaving the cries of insects and dusk birds and the low volume of student chatter to fill the air. Sethos watches as the sun sets over the rainforest and the gardens of Pardis Dhyai in the distance. Beyond it, Sethos knows there's Caravan Ribat and Aaru Village and then home.

The fabric of Hat Guy's hat rustles in the breeze, occasionally brushing against Sethos' arm as the bells on the ends jingle quietly.

***

Sethos knows that Hat Guy goes to Puspa Café sometimes. It's where they had first spoken to each other, putting aside Hat Guy's small apology for bursting into Sethos' meeting with Nahida.

Knowing this doesn't prepare Sethos for how odd it feels to look up from his conversation with Enteka and see Hat Guy glowering over a cup of tea, a pile of neatly-arranged but untouched baklava squares and a thick textbook in front of him.

Enteka must see his eyes dart towards Hat Guy and back because she smiles at Sethos knowingly.

"Do you know each other?"

Sethos has been asked some version of this question since he started running errands around the city and now knows just how annoyed Hat Guy gets when someone calls them Sumeru City's Errand Boys, or equates them in any way.

"Yeah!" he says, overly enthusiastic, knowing that Hat Guy will easily be able to hear him even from across the room. "We see each other while running errands around the city."

He can almost hear Hat Guy's soft noise of disgust through the café crowd.

"Oh good," Enteka says as a black and white cat jumps onto her shoulder and begins sniffing at her hair. "I'm a bit busy, as you can see. I was hoping that I could ask you to share his table."

"I don't mind, but he might."

Enteka laughs at this, another knowing smile spreading across her

face. Reaching up, she scratches the cat underneath its chin. “You’ll be fine, I think.”

There’s something awkward about having to approach Hat Guy’s table midday and ask if he can sit there, even with the excuse of Enteka’s request, because it’s too busy. Similarly, it’s still odd to see Hat Guy there at all outside of their familiar environment at the Great Tree. Sethos doesn’t have much time to think beyond his initial recognition of this fact — this isn’t going to be as comfortable as “their spot” — before he’s at Hat Guy’s table sheepishly asking if he can sit down, cup of coffee in hand.

Hat Guy makes his usually exasperated noise but points at the seat across from him anyway.

“Thanks!” Sethos says brightly.

“What were you talking about with Enteka?”

Still unused to Hat Guy initiating conversation or asking him anything, Sethos startles, his arm freezing halfway between his mouth and the table and nearly spilling hot coffee into his lap. Clearing his throat, he takes a gulp of the scalding liquid and swallows quickly, feeling it burn his throat.

He probably won’t be able to taste things properly for a week.

“Oh she asked if I knew you.”

Hat Guy nods, seemingly satisfied with this answer. The scowl remains on Hat Guy’s face even as he sips his tea and Sethos finds himself beaming at Hat Guy from across the table.

Tapping his fingers against the ceramic coffee mug, Sethos tries to think of something to say or ask. For some reason, not talking in the café seems much more awkward than simply sitting next to each other on a tree branch. It’s probably the crowd of Akademiya students and Corps of Thirty members milling around, chattering loudly. Sethos doesn’t think they’re listening — doesn’t think they’re paying attention to him at all — but Hat Guy flinches occasionally, like he’s about to make a break for the door.

In fairness, Sethos has seen a few people looking at Hat Guy with curiosity, probably because Hat Guy is still wearing his ridiculously large hat indoors.

The only other people Sethos has seen wear hats regularly indoors have been Akademiya students, with their pins denoting which Darshan they belong to as part of their uniforms.

“How’s the baklava?” Sethos asks.

It comes out clumsily and Hat Guy seems to agree because he raises an eyebrow and glares at Sethos before answering.

“I don’t like them,” Hat Guy says, with a put-upon sigh.

“Then why did you order them?” Sethos asks, genuinely curious. He hasn’t seen Hat Guy eat anything outside of fish rolls and even then, Hat Guy had seemed like he’d never eaten in his life with how awkward he had chewed them.

“She keeps giving me them.”

“Why don’t you just tell her you don’t like them?”

It seems like a straightforward problem with an easy enough solution to Sethos, but Hat Guy grimaces in response.

“You like them.” Hat Guy says this like a certainty, pushing the plate onto Sethos’ side of the table like a petulant child. “You eat them.”

“How do you know that I like them, Hat Guy?”

“You were eating them that day it rained.”

Floored that Hat Guy is both offering something to him out of genuine interest and remembers that he had been eating baklava at Puspa Café the day they met, Sethos laughs. He hadn’t thought that Hat Guy’s glare could become more intense but somehow it does and Sethos holds his hands up in a gesture of surrender before popping an entire square of baklava into his mouth.

The syrupy-sweetness of honey and ajilenakh nuts bursts onto his tongue and he can’t help but let out a small but happy moan at the taste. As he chews, Sethos closes his eyes and wonders if the taste of ajilenakh nuts will always remind him of home.

“Kabukimono.” Hat Guy says quietly.

“What?”

Sighing as if its somehow Sethos’ fault for not immediately

understanding Hat Guy whispering something in what Sethos is pretty sure is Inazuman, Hat Guy puts down his teacup and narrows his eyes.

“My name. Call me Kabukimono. Not Hat Guy.”

Sethos swallows the remainder of the baklava so quickly he nearly chokes on it. Coughing, he scratches behind his head in an attempt to diffuse the sudden heaviness in the air.

“Oh.”

Hat Guy wasn’t saying a random thing in Inazuman, he was telling Sethos his name.

“Kabukimono—”

From the look on Kabukimono’s face, Sethos doesn’t get the pronunciation quite right.

“Kabukimono,” he repeats. “What does it mean?”

A sad look flashes across Kabukimono’s face before his mouth turns down into its near-permanent frown.

“Wandering eccentric. In Inazuman.”

Before Sethos can ask why Kabukimono is called this, or who named him this and why, Kabukimono continues, biting his lower lip as he speaks.

“My…friends…called me this. Or so I was…told.”

Sethos has so many questions.

What friends?

Why “wandering eccentric” and not a more standard Inazuman name?

Why was he “told” rather than knowing himself?

Remembering how Hat Guy — Kabukimono — had effectively backed off when Sethos hadn’t known how to describe his duel with Cyno, Sethos swallows again, keeping these questions to himself.

Unbidden, Nahida’s words come to mind.

“He once achieved his greatest ambition.”

I do have reason to believe that he's happier now than he ever was previously."

"Okay," Sethos says. "Kabukimono."

It feels like a wholly inadequate answer, but Kabukimono's face moves into the same almost-smile that Sethos had seen during one of their meet-ups at the Great Tree and Sethos knows that somehow he's said the right thing.

Suddenly, Puspa Café feels like any other afternoon or evening they've spent together as they sit across from each other, sipping their respective drinks. Occasionally, one of the corners of Kabukimono's mouth turns upwards almost shyly if Kabukimono even has the capacity to be shy.

Sethos beams back at him from over the rim of his coffee mug.

Chapter End Notes

> We finally got to the naming chapter so Sethos doesn't always have to call him Hat Guy anymore! Jokes aside I hope it came across as both meaningful but in-character for how their relationship has developed in this story thus far.
>
> Wanderer's perspective of the middle scene in this chapter can be found here: I still don't have any memories
>
> Thank you for reading!!!

why is it like this?

Chapter Notes

> Passages taken from *A Thousand Nights* as part of Wanderer's Akademiya research.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Steady.”

His grandfather places a hand on Sethos’ shoulder. It’s a firm touch — enough to let Sethos know that he’s there for support without disrupting Sethos’ concentration.

The sand dune swims in front of his eyes, shimmering just below the horizon in the afternoon heat. His unsuspecting prey — a fat desert crow — sits on top of the sand, cleaning between its feathers as a large tumbleweed rolls past.

Holding position, Sethos’ hears the tension in his bowstring when he draws it back further. Tears brought on by the wind and the brightness of the desert sun, drip down his cheeks. He squints through them, keeping his eyes on his target. While he waits for the crow to move into a better position, he idly strokes the fletching, brushing back the dark dusk bird feathers against the grain before smoothing them forward in the direction that they’re meant to face.

The crow takes flight.

Sethos tracks it in an arc across the sky, releasing just ahead of the bird’s trajectory.

The crow falls from the sky, Sethos’ arrow lodged in its chest.

Behind him, his grandfather grunts approvingly.

Internally, Sethos can feel Hermanubis’ spirit praise his archery prowess. A crackling and powerful warmth rises in his chest.

When they reach the crow’s body, there’s an electro current sparking against the sand, its power both from Sethos’ recently received vision and Hermanubis’ power. Sethos knows he’s grown significantly stronger since that ill-fated hunt a month ago, the resulting electro vision working perfectly in tandem with the Ba Fragment embedded in his body.

It's an exceptionally-clean shot and there's very little mess, even when Sethos removes the arrow under his grandfather's instruction.

"These feathers will guide your arrows better than scrounging from dusk bird nests. I'll show you how to clean it properly when we get back to camp."

Sethos watches a dribble of blood stain the sand underneath the crow. "I thought this would get easier," he admits. "But it still seems sad."

"That's because it is," his grandfather says. "But you should be proud of your shot, and it won't go to waste."

He's smiling, but there's a distant look in his eyes as he stares past the bleeding crow towards the sky where King Deshret's Tomb looms, dyeing the horizon red. Sniffling, Sethos tries to smile back, swiping his arm across his eyes to catch the tears and ignoring the burn of sand on his cheeks where his scarf can't cover, even while pulled up over his nose and mouth.

"I have something for you."

This time the person speaking isn't Sethos' grandfather but Bamoun, the leader of the Temple of Silence.

When Sethos looks up, he finds his grandfather staring at him with a grave expression. He feels something warm and soft in the palm of his hand and when he looks down he sees the weathered leather waterskin that his grandfather carries around on his belt.

"It's yours now."

Sethos somehow knows that his grandfather isn't just talking about the waterskin.

"Thank you.".

Sethos wakes up gasping.

His throat feels like it's sealing itself off somehow and he sits up in bed, clutching his chest and wheezing. Tears gather in the corners of his eyes and all he can hear are his own harsh breaths echoing through his small bedroom and in his own ears.

It passes eventually like it always does. He's been waking up like this less often since finding his footing in Sumeru City — getting to know everyone in and around Treasures Street, meetings with Cyno and

now Nahida, and eating more meals with Kabukimono. It hasn't happened in a while, which is probably why this one feels particularly bad.

Still clutching his chest, Sethos tries to remember bits and pieces from his dream. His breathing begins to slow.

"I have something for you."

Sethos' hand automatically moves towards the small table next to his bed. The sun is beginning to rise — which means he probably has to get up in an hour or less anyway — and the soft morning light is streaming through his open window onto his hand as he reaches to grab his grandfather's waterskin from where he always puts it before falling asleep. His gloves and bracer are neatly folded next to it on the table. His bow is leaning against the other side of it, between the table and the wall — always in reach just in case.

Running his bare fingers over the ancient waterskin, Sethos frowns.

Unlike most of his panicked awakenings, this hadn't been a nightmare. He remembers this particular moment fondly — a moment where he felt recognized by Bamoun, the Temple of Silence leader but simultaneously loved by his grandfather.

The leather is soft and cool underneath his fingertips.

It grounds Sethos, even as he aches from a renewed sense of loss.

***

He tells Nahida about his dream later that afternoon during their meeting. They've almost finished reorganizing the entire office, ridding it of esoteric texts and vacant canned knowledge canisters that Sethos can only imagine were placeholders for the actual sensitive information that the Akademiya office was tasked with destroying.

Nahida's eyes dart towards the waterskin strapped behind the purple cloth of Sethos' belt as Sethos finishes telling her what he remembers.

"Dreams are very important," she says, humming softly to herself. "I remember meeting a man who wanted to dream he was a slime."

"What?"

Whatever Sethos had expected from Nahida's response, it hadn't been

that. He laughs and she smiles knowingly. Anticipating his incredulous follow-up of, “Really?” she nods in his direction and continues her story.

“He hadn’t yet, but he wanted to experience a dream as a slime and then as a small animal. After talking to him more, he realized that ultimately, what he wanted was the feeling of freedom.”

Folding her hands together, Nahida leans forward over her side of the desk.

“The dreams he wanted reflected the life he wanted and also, the advice I eventually gave him was to start small.”

Sethos nods, still unsure as to what exactly she’s trying to say or what relevance the story has to his dream outside of them both being dreams. He honestly hasn’t felt unsettled in Sumeru City at all lately, which is why this dream — in addition to not being a nightmare like the others — had taken him by surprise. He opens his mouth to explain this but she speaks before he can say anything.

“‘A new sense of adventure often begins with the little things in life,’” she quotes. “However, in your case, I don’t think you even need my advice. You have already embraced everyday life and the people of Sumeru City.”

“So what’s your advice?”

“Despite dreaming it, by your own admission this is less of a dream and more of a memory.” Nahida smiles at him again. To his surprise, she shrugs.

“The soundest and most likely conclusion would be that you simply miss your grandfather.”

“Is it really that simple?”

Sethos doesn’t mean to say this aloud. It slips out automatically, more of a question to himself than Nahida, but Nahida considers him seriously and sits back in her chair.

“Ah…”

Nahida places her finger on her chin like she always does, green eyes flashing with power. The increasingly-familiar gesture makes Sethos smile. He doesn’t know Nahida’s entire story outside of rumours that

he only half-believes — if Nahida wants him to know something, Sethos has learned that she has no problem telling him directly — but there's something inviting about her childlike curiosity.

It reminds him of Kabukimono, or Kabukimono reminds him of Nahida, sometimes.

It's uncanny how straightforward Nahida is, with absolute confidence in herself even if she doesn't fully understand the problem in front of her. But her actual thirst for knowledge and obvious desire to understand others is the most human trait that Sethos can think of.

Even Sethos has to look away from the openness in her facial expressions. No human would ever allow themselves to be so openly vulnerable and it intimidates him.

He supposes that this is the power of an Archon — to reveal one's self so obviously that even when one seems vulnerable, they aren't. Sethos then berates himself internally for thinking so casually of an Archon, even if she did tell him directly to call her by name and not stand on ceremony.

She had even purposefully drawn parallels between their similar lack of experience with their respective roles.

Nahida clears her throat, bringing his attention back to the conversation.

"Sorry!" Sethos rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, smiling down at her from across what he now supposes is his desk.

He still spends very little time in the Akademiya Temple of Silence Office outside of his meetings with Nahida.

"I think it is that simple, depending on context," she says, picking up their conversation from the moment before Sethos had become lost in thought. "Often, the simplest answer is the most correct, even as humans will invent convoluted reasoning as to why it is not."

Sethos finds that he can't argue with that logic.

***

"Have you read *The Tale of the Dastur*?"

His mouth still full of baklava, Sethos shakes his head instead of

responding to Kabukimono directly. Above them, the orange-coloured café umbrella rustles in the breeze.

Recently, Puspa Café has become just as much of a regular meeting place for them as the Great Tree. It allows Kabukimono to work on his ongoing thesis project with far less noise than Lambad's and ample room on the café's tables for Kabukimono to spread out his research material.

Sethos has been surprised by how much Kabukimono has thrown himself into his studies recently — something to do with the tales in *A Thousand Nights* that Kabukimono hasn't described in any sort of detail outside of occasionally asking Sethos about random things related to the Temple of Silence. Every time they meet up now, whether it's at their usual place or going to Puspa Café together, Kabukimono is studying.

They've still come a long way in what feels like a few short weeks — from Kabukimono refusing to talk about anything related to etiology or his studies to the Vahumana scholar peppering Sethos with more questions every time they see each other.

Kabukimono has also abandoned any and all shyness around Sethos, opting for terse and direct demands for Sethos to talk to him about his personal experiences at the temple. Now that the initial shock of Kabukimono initiating conversations more regularly has passed, Sethos has come to expect it.

He just doesn't have a lot of answers for what Kabukimono wants to know.

For Sethos, a lot of his so-called Temple of Silence experiences are ordinary memories of spending time with his grandfather. He's not even certain how much his childhood is all that different from members of other desert tribes outside of having to read more books and memorize certain passages.

His initial bond with Hermanubis was indescribable. Even now, Sethos characterizes it more in flashes of emotion and feeling rather than anything material or solid.

And the loss of the Ba Fragment and Hermanubis is similarly indescribable but also devastating.

Nahida had implied that Kabukimono had lost something significant in his own past, but Sethos doesn't know how to ask about it, never

mind talk about his own experience.

It's already done. It's finished, and well within his grandfather's contingency plans even if Sethos' own ties to Hermanubis remain severed. Sethos truly believes that Cyno is the correct vessel and it's always better to look forward than to dwell on the past.

With a disapproving click of his tongue, Kabukimono slides a worn copy of *A Thousand Nights* towards Sethos, the bells on his hat chiming softly as he ducks his head.

A drop of sweat rolls down Sethos' face. Sumeru City has been under a particularly oppressive heat wave lately and while Sethos is used to dealing with temperatures this hot, the humidity is suffocating.

"I have read it in a way." Sethos swallows and drags his fingertip across the fading embossed letters of the book's title stamped across the worn cover. It has a large watermark at the corner that marks it as an Akademiya copy belonging to the House of Daena. "The Akademiya version is different than the one at the Temple of Silence."

Eyes wide, Kabukimono reaches forward and slams his hand down onto the table. The dish of half-eaten baklava rattles against the wooden tabletop and some of Sethos' coffee sloshes over the rim of his mug. "Tell me."

Taken aback by Kabukimono's almost violent response, Sethos looks down at the fraying spine of *A Thousand Nights*. Kabukimono's hand is right next to it, and Sethos can't help but notice how smooth Kabukimono's skin is or how neatly-trimmed his nails are, the black leather of his gloves gleaming in comparison to the faded fabric of the book cover.

At least they're outside on the patio where it's much quieter. There's only one other patron out here and she's at a table far away enough to not have noticed Kabukimono's small outburst.

"There's not much to tell." Sethos shrugs. "There's a story similar to your *Tale of the Dastur*, I think, but I haven't studied the differences."

Kabukimono frowns, dissatisfied with Sethos' answer. His brows knit together over his eyes, which flash with indignation. Briefly, Sethos imagines Kabukimono walking up to his grandfather and demanding an itemized and detailed list of all of the differences between their version at the temple and the Akademiya version which — Sethos is almost entirely certain — they didn't have a copy of in the temple

archives.

Sethos nearly laughs and Kabukimono immediately catches onto Sethos' amusement, somehow scrunching his face up so his expression becomes even more murderous. It reminds Sethos of the first few times they had spoken, although Kabukimono's current rage is softer somehow.

Realizing that he's grown used to reading Kabukimono's expressions, Sethos smiles.

"Tch. Why are you smiling?"

"No reason."

Huffing indignantly, Kabukimono pulls the book back to his side of the table and makes a show of opening it to *The Tale of the Dastur*. "Read this. Then tell me the differences."

"Are you giving me your homework?" Sethos grins so widely that his cheeks begin to hurt.

"No."

"Because if you are, you're going to have to give me more time than this."

"I'm not giving you 'my homework.'" Kabukimono huffs again and slides the book back over to Sethos, keeping it opened to the first page of *The Tale of the Dastur*.

With another laugh, Sethos begins to read.

> *Once upon a time, there was a Vahumana Dastur who traveled alone into the desert depths to investigate the ruins of ancient realms. Unfortunately, he encountered a sandstorm and lost his way. But just as he was about to breathe his last, a young woman with amber eyes appeared before him. She parted the howling sands with the staff in her hand, and led him out of the desert.*
>
> *It was already noon by the time they reached the village. She treated him to lunch at her home and offered to escort him back to Caravan Ribat. But, having seen her part the sands as if by some spell, and how she had chased the dark beasts along their path away, the Dastur refused to leave—*

A droplet of water on his arm startles Sethos. It slowly rolls down his arm, pulling him out of the story. He's never sweat from his elbows before but in this humidity Sethos supposes that there's a first time for everything. Snapping his head up, he locks eyes with Kabukimono who is glaring at him from across the table.

"I'm not going to read it faster because you're staring at me," he jokes, grinning widely.

Kabukimono grunts and looks back down at whatever he was scribbling across one of the many parts of his thesis draft organized next to his bitter tea. Sethos returns to *The Tale of the Dastur*.

> *—instead asking if she could teach him the secret arts of ancient lands.*
>
> *The mage replied that her amber eyes could see all that the living and the dead had seen. People without shadows, a bronze clock whose pendulum swings by the power of imagination, whales that have never left land, a city that only exists by the reflected moonlight upon a silver mirror, a scholar imprisoned within eternity, a high tower hanging upon seven strings. She could see—*

Another droplet hits his elbow and Sethos realizes that it's not sweat but rain. Resisting the urge to laugh, he slides the book further towards the centre of the table and away from any stray raindrops.

Sethos bites his lip to stop himself from asking Kabukimono if he remembers that first time they spoke directly to each other. Wrapping his hands around his now lukewarm mug, Sethos sips his coffee and closes his eyes. The sound of rain on the umbrella above them is soothing. Despite the half-drunk coffee in his hand, he feels hazy and sleepy.

"Not going to dance in the rain this time?" Kabukimono's voice is almost smug. This time when Sethos looks back at him, he's smirking openly at Sethos like he's already won an argument.

"I thought you might have forgotten."

Kabukimono snorts and crosses his arms over his chest like Sethos has just issued some sort of challenge. "Why would I? My memory is better than yours and it didn't happen that long ago."

Truthfully, it had meant a lot to Sethos. It had been the first time since

coming to Sumeru City that the weight of expectations and the loss of Hermanubis, and his grandfather's death had briefly lifted. He can't think of a reason why Kabukimono would remember it similarly. "It seems like it happened a long time ago," he says.

"Does it? Time must pass differently for you."

Shrugging, Sethos shifts in his chair, tilting his head back. The underside of the café umbrella is worn and a few raindrops make their way down the handle through a small hole at the centre.

"I like the feeling of it," Sethos admits. "It hardly ever rains in the desert."

"You must be happy then…here."

"I am." Sticking his hand out from under the umbrella's canopy, Sethos watches the rainwater collect in the palm of his hand. It drips down his arm and despite the afternoon heat, he shivers. "You aren't happy here?"

Kabukimono makes a frustrated noise that Sethos can't remember him ever making before. When Sethos looks back at him, Kabukimono leans forward across the table. His eyes are scrunched up, causing wrinkles at the corners that Sethos didn't know he had.

More than anything else, Kabukimono looks human.

"I am…not unhappy."

Sethos nearly replies with a joking remark about how that doesn't answer the question, or that Kabukimono certainly doesn't look happy right now, but stops himself when sees Kabukimono's pinched expression again.

Pages from *A Thousand Nights* rustle in the breeze losing Sethos' placeholder. His chair screeches against the stone patio as he suddenly stands up. Wiping off the rain onto his trousers, he gestures towards the curtain of rain falling over the city.

"You should try it," he tells Kabukimono.

The disgusted look on Kabukimono's face could possibly kill something faster than any of Sethos' electro-charged arrows.

"No."

“Can you feel it at all?” Sethos asks. He says this in a similar way to how he asked whether Kabukimono could taste food but at least for that invasive question, Sethos had Kabukimono’s odd exchange with Nahida as evidence.

Sethos doesn’t know what Kabukimono is, if he’s not exactly human.

Lately, he’s felt like he can be more open with Kabukimono and Kabukimono is certainly less terse and closed-off than when they first met. This was apparently too much and Sethos opens his mouth to apologize only to be interrupted by a frustrated-sounding, “Not really.”

“Not really?” Sethos echoes. His misstep seconds earlier still doesn’t stop him from automatically asking, “What does that mean?”

“I can feel some of it.”

What are you?

Sethos doesn’t say this but it seems like Kabukimono recognizes at least some of what Sethos wants to ask because his open glare softens into a more challenging smirk, like he’s daring Sethos.

“You should try it,” Sethos repeats. “It’s fun.”

Stepping out into the rain, Sethos tilts his head back. Water drips from his face and down his neck. His clothes quickly become soaked. Lighting flashes in the distance and cool fingers wrap around his wrist, tugging him back underneath the umbrella.

“You’re an idiot,” Kabukimono says flatly as he shoves Sethos down into his seat. “Don’t drip on my paper.”

Stunned, Sethos looks down at Kabukimono’s pale fingertips. Although they were almost cold at first, now they’re warm. Kabukimono’s skin is impossibly soft, even as Kabukimono’s grip painfully tightens around his wrist before releasing it with a small shove.

Sethos can’t help but laugh. “It’s warm outside. I want to enjoy this while I can.”

“It rains almost every day here. You should be used to it by now.”

The sound of rain hitting the umbrella and the stone floor of the café patio grows quieter while Sethos thinks of how to respond. He’s grown

more accustomed to the rain since moving to Sumeru City, but there's still something foreign and special about it that he doesn't know how to put into words.

"Did it rain back home? In Inazuma?"

It's an educated guess based on Kabukimono's name and writing but Kabukimono still looks stupefied by Sethos' question.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to…" he trails off with an unsure smile that only seems to annoy Kabukimono even more. Sethos has no idea of how to finish his apology. "Offend" almost seems like an accusation. "Upset you" is pointless because Kabukimono will never admit to being upset.

Sethos doesn't know what exactly he said to set Kabukimono off, save the mention of Inazuma as Kabukimono's home.

Brows knitting together in anger, Kabukimono ducks his head so the wide brim of his hat hides his expression and begins gathering his papers into a neat pile. Kabukimono folds them and shoves the pile between the pages of *A Thousand Nights*. Tucking the book under his arm with an angry noise, Kabukimono storms off into the rain. The bells on his hat tinkle, mingling with fading thunder and rain pattering off of the stone streets.

Draining the rest of his coffee, Sethos sighs and walks out into the rain a few moments later. It doesn't feel warm or freeing anymore.

***

Two days later, Sethos goes to their branch in the Great Tree at the usual time with food for two despite fully-expecting that Kabukimono will not show up at all. He brings a book that Afshin had recommended and had failed to sell to Zubayr Theatre's patrons. It's an action-spy novella set in Snezhnaya that, thus far, isn't very good. Sethos can see why Afshin had trouble selling it.

The rogue and devastatingly-attractive Fatui hero, Valery Alexeyevich Medvedev, is being threatened by the Tsaritsa for what seems like the tenth time in as many pages when a familiar shadow falls over Sethos.

"You read that garbage?"

Sethos shrugs, unable to stop a wide grin of relief from spreading across his face as he looks up and sees Kabukimono glaring down from the branch above.

Without waiting for an answer, Kabukimono jumps down from the branch onto the stone path below. Glowering at Sethos, he tilts his head in the direction of the House of Daena, motioning for Sethos to follow.

Sethos gathers the lunchbox of fish rolls that Mairamou has been graciously providing him — Mairamou is under the mistaken impression that he and Kabukimono are dating and he hasn't had an opportunity to correct her — sighs, and makes his way down the tree much more slowly.

"I can't just jump out of trees like you." Sethos waves at Kabukimono's body with a smile as he lands onto the street, a small stinging pain in his heels from the last jump down. He braces himself for Kabukimono to storm off again, but Kabukimono simply snorts and walks brusquely into the library without waiting for Sethos, fully expecting him to follow.

He does, tucking the lunchbox under his arm and the novella into the pocket of his trousers.

Instead of going to the side entrance, as Sethos had expected and walked towards himself until he realizes that Kabukimono has veered off of the path slightly. With a slight tap, Kabukimono opens a hidden doorway in the wall, closing the door firmly behind Sethos as soon as he darts in after him.

"Ah, the Restricted Repository!"

Kabukimono huffs affirmatively. "You've been here before?"

"No, but I was told by Nahi— I mean, Lesser Lord Kusanali, that this is where many of the documents we organized in the old Temple of Silence office were taken."

"You can call her by name," Kabukimono says derisively.

Sethos shrugs and laughs. "She said the same thing. I don't need to stand on ceremony with her or anything but it feels odd to call an Archon by name in front of other people."

"Tch. I don't care."

Storming ahead of Sethos, Kabukimono takes off down the hallway, his footsteps echoing loudly against the polished marble floor. The Restricted Repository looks like a single alcove of the House of Daena

without the various tables and chairs for researchers to settle down with their books.

Sethos walks up to the closest shelf. The lacquered wooden shelves are as pristine and polished as the floor, but the books themselves are much dustier. Most of them look to be in rougher condition and more haphazardly organized, with shelves holding anything from ancient scrolls and stone tablets to recently-bound theses to glowing canned knowledge canisters. Eyes widening, Sethos backs away from the shelves and looks around for Kabukimono who, despite the small size of the room, seems to have disappeared. Sethos shoves his hands in his pockets and looks up at the carved stone ceiling.

If Sethos is remembering his contract with the Akademiya correctly, as the Temple of Silence heir, he already has unlimited access to the Restricted Repository, but the lingering doubt keeps him rooted in place, looking around the room instead. He doesn't know why Kabukimono brought him here.

A nervous-looking Akademiya researcher at the shelves coughs, his hat slipping slightly over his long grey hair as he slowly approaches Sethos. He's still a few metres away when his eyes widen at something over Sethos' shoulder and he immediately turns around, walking quickly back to the stacks.

"Here."

Sethos jumps at the sound of Kabukimono's voice behind him. When he turns around, Kabukimono grabs his wrist and places a canned knowledge canister into his palm.

"Take it," Kabukimono demands.

Laughing, less out of amusement and more because he can't think of what else to do in this situation, Sethos grins. "I can't take this. It's against Akademiya rules. And while I don't think Akademiya rules always apply to me as the heir to the Temple of Silence, I know canned knowledge is something I'm not allowed to mess with."

Kabukimono looks around the room as if they have an audience much larger than the one researcher who has either left or is hiding behind the stacks to get away from Kabukimono's intensity.

"I have permission."

Sethos' mouth falls open. "How?"

“Ugh, this isn’t dangerous. It’s a copy of your version of *The Tale of the Dastur*. I looked it up yesterday.” Kabukimono narrows his eyes in frustration. “Didn’t you know that as Temple of Silence heir you have access to all of this anyway? You’re not breaking any rules.”

Sethos is glad for the confirmation, but now he’s wondering how Kabukimono knows this and why.

Who is he?

“I thought this would be closer to what you grew up with,” Kabukimono explains. He sounds both hesitant and angry and Sethos is shocked that Kabukimono is still speaking at all. In Sethos’ experience, Kabukimono is not someone who voluntarily provides context to anything.

“Open it up and then tell me the differences,” he orders.

Sethos turns the canister over in his hand, watching as the green light pulses warmly against his skin. He thinks of sharing stories from the temple library with his grandfather and curls his fingers around the smooth glass. He doesn't even know how to use this but he's heard of the dangers.

Kabukimono had purposefully sought this out for him because he’d mentioned his childhood version the last time they had met. Even if it’s just for Kabukimono's thesis, the gesture is—

“You need this for your research?” Sethos’ voice cracks and he swallows down the rising lump of emotion in his throat.

“Just take it.” Kabukimono shrugs and grunts and then nods, ducking his head forward so the brim of his hat hides his expression. "You'll be able to use it. Your Archon made sure of it."

Sethos realizes that this is Kabukimono apologizing.

Swallowing again, Sethos tucks the canister into his pocket where it bumps against the novella, weighing down his trousers.

“Thank you,” he says slowly. “I’ll let you know about the differences the next time we meet up.”

Kabukimono nods again and then walks away, footsteps and the familiar sound of bells echoing down the hallway and in Sethos’ ears.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was difficult to write and I wrote it in tandem with a Wanderer POV fic for these scenes so I hope that both of their actions/thoughts come across as believable.

Also this is looking like it's going to be eight or nine chapters. I'll change the chapter total to something concrete once I have a better idea of it.

Thank you for reading!

did everyone else feel electrified?

Chapter Notes

> It's rewritten completely but the plot of the Tale of the Dastur is taken from the in-game A Thousand Nights.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sandstorm whips up quickly from nothing, howling loudly in her ears. Leaning on her staff, she moves her hand to find her way outside of it when she hears someone cry out.

They're not crying for help.

They've already accepted their death.

She twists her wrist in the direction of the sound and raises her staff. The sands part obediently.

He's still quaking with fear, tears streaming down his face, as she leads him out of the worst of the storm. It's not until they reach her home that he stops crying.

As he dips what little bread she has left into yesterday's stew, he turns his red-rimmed eyes to her and begs her to train him.

With a pointed look at his Akademiya robes, she shakes her head. He falls to his knees, tugging at the fabric of her trousers just above her sandals. Shocked, she watches as he kisses the leather straps across her feet.

"I will never forget what you've done for me," he says, "and I will never deny you. You have my word as Demir Badan, Dastur of the Sumeru Akademiya. Please take me on as your apprentice."

She bites her tongue, knowing how this will all end. Still, she refuses to make her distrust of the Sumeru Akademiya — and anyone outside of the desert — known to Demir, and leads him down a long flight of stairs into her library. At every level, she sees his face brighten in the mirrors positioned next to the flickering candles inlaid into the sandstone walls.

Days and weeks and nearly a month passes before Emre, a fellow acolyte from the Temple, arrives with the news that Demir's thesis

has passed review, but his mentor has died and the Akademiya wants to promote him to Herbad immediately to take over his mentor's classes.

She goes, thinking bitterly of her sister who had been rejected by the Akademiya due to their family's desert heritage. And although she already knows who Demir will become and how, she holds onto a glimmer of hope that potentially, things could be different this time.

Years go by and she works at Demir's side unofficially, helping him with several other thesis thanks to her magical abilities and her Temple education. She asks him two more times to take her sister on as an Akademiya pupil and he rejects her as she had expected, advising her to return to the desert.

Through the years, she grows more bitter, reciting his promise to her over and over to harden her heart. When she hears that Demir has become the Akademiya's Grand Sage, she returns to Sumeru City to beg for aid for the desert tribes, calling upon his promise decades prior. Not only does he reject her again but he grows irrationally angry, taunting her for her heritage and threatening to imprison her.

This is her time.

The binding placed upon her by his soldiers is easily dispatched by one of her magical skill, and yet she waits until she lies prostrate at his feet to look him in the eyes and tell him, "In that case, I must ask you, sir, to return to your own village."

It's child's play to make the years disappear. She knows he has forgotten just how powerful of a mage she is.

She sees the confusion in Demir's eyes as he looks wildly around the Caravan Ribat hotel where she had taken him after saving him from the sandstorm. Still young and beautiful and yet to pass his thesis review, Demir looks up and sees her calm smile.

"Go back to the Akademiya," she says, "And leave us in peace."

Sethos jerks awake.

The canned knowledge canister rolls onto the floor with a loud clattering sound and stops when it hits his feet. It's no longer pulsing with bright green light, the glass now a cloudy grey colour. Carefully, he picks it up and places it onto his small desk.

Despite the fact that he's certain it will never work for him or anyone else again, he doesn't want to throw it out. From what little he knows of these canisters — his grandfather had said that they were not dangerous on their own but that the Akademiya sages had used them to control people, and that certain eremite tribes had trafficked forbidden knowledge canisters for spite or profit or both — they can only be used once.

He's heard rumours of what happened at the Akademiya once the Traveller had arrived — his grandfather had kept him as informed as possible, especially with so much simultaneous turnover within the Akademiya's leadership group — but hasn't confirmed them specifically with anyone. Despite knowing that Nahida would answer his questions to the best of her ability, he hasn't asked her about it.

It's a bit like the difference between the worn copy of *A Thousand Nights* that Kabukimono has used for his thesis research, and the canister of canned knowledge that Kabukimono had given to Sethos directly. Sethos now has the story of the mage and the Akademiya's treachery directly in his mind like a memory.

Distrust for the Akademiya rightfully runs rampant throughout the desert and the Temple of Silence is no exception.

As the new Temple of Silence leader, Sethos is trying to change that.

For the first time since he came to Sumeru City, he wonders if he shouldn't go home. The latest message from Betresa had arrived just a few days ago and had been nothing but positive and proud. He knows that she would tell him if something is wrong — if older temple members have begun to question his absence. Betresa has always been on Sethos' side because she firmly stood by Bamoun for years. She's the one person who could potentially feel the same gut-wrenching loss that Sethos still occasionally feels when he thinks about his grandfather.

A headache begins to build behind his eyes. Sethos rubs his temples with his fingertips. He tastes bile in his throat and swallows, hoping it will somehow help with his rising nausea.

Homesickness strikes him with a sudden and painful pang in his chest and Sethos finds himself bringing his hand to his heart, clawing at the fabric of his tunic just above his heart. His fingers tug at the gold filigree underneath his scarf.

Throughout his time living in the city Sethos hasn't had much need for

his scarf. There's no swirling sand in the wind to block from going into his nose or mouth so it lies limply around his neck, made slightly heavier by rainforest humidity.

Rubbing at his temples again, Sethos inhales slowly.

Sethos had promised Shams that he would meet the captain at the docks with a meal from Lambad's, and had told Pam that he would grab her more live bait from the Treasures Street bait stall.

He walks outside, repeating his to-do list of errands in his head until the mage's story fades to the back of his mind.

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Shams is exactly where he told Lambad — who told Sethos — he would be, albeit two days later than expected and sporting a fresh scar on his cheek as well as a beard to accompany his usual moustache. A light breeze blows through the port, bringing the saltier scent of the sea with it.

Sethos watches Shams' face light up, worry fading from the previously-tense set of his mouth and brows, when Sethos hands him a sturdy paper box filled with Lambad's biryani.

"Rough trip?" Sethos asks, taking a seat on one of Shams' offloaded cargo crates.

"You have no idea," Shams says, voice muffled by the food he's shoveling into into his mouth with abandon. "This Inazuma route is going to kill me."

Swinging his legs out in front of him, Sethos tilts his head back and looks up through the brightly-coloured green fabric of the dock canopy. Through the thick sheets of cloth, Sethos can see upper Treasures Street and the winding stone staircase around the Sumeru Great Tree towards the Akademiya. On the other side of the building is the large branch where he and Kabukimono have taken to meeting each other to share a late lunch or early dinner.

Sethos hasn't seen Kabukimono since Kabukimono gave him the canned knowledge canister in the Restricted Repository and left.

"What happened this time?" he asks Shams, who launches into a story about persistent fog and continued electrical storms in the Inzauma archipelago. A few grains of rice have stuck in his beard and

moustache and Sethos makes a motion across his own face that Shams unfortunately doesn't follow as he continues to talk animatedly in between bites.

"Under the Sankoku Decree it was much worse, but even now the weather is awful," Shams says, finishing his story. "We're lucky that the Crux Fleet often patrols that area during their runs between Inazuma and Liyue."

"Did you see Captain Beidou again?"

Shams shakes his head. "I wish."

Before Sethos is dragged into another awkward conversation where Shams goes down his detailed list of Captain Beidou's numerous physical and intellectual assets, Sethos clears his throat and jumps off of the pile of crates.

"Glad she and the fleet could be there for you," he tells Shams, "and I'm happy you have some time to celebrate another successful trip."

With a hearty laugh, Shams shoves a decorated pamphlet covered in gold leaf into Sethos' hands. "I don't have mora to pay for the delivery but I found this on the way."

Running his fingers through the weighty fringe of the gold tassel attached to the top of the pamphlet, Sethos shakes his head. "'Something of Gold,'" he reads slowly.

Sethos doesn't recognize the first character in the title, but knows that the Liyuen word for gold is similar to the universal symbol for Mora. "This is worth much more than delivering a meal from Lambad's."

Shams shrugs. He looks a bit cagey when Sethos tries to give the thick gold cardstock back to him and crosses his arms over his chest so Sethos can't place it back into his hands. "Like I said, I found it."

At this point, Sethos is almost certain that Shams' insistence that he "found it" means that he took it from someone in Liyue or, alternatively, actually found it but didn't report it as part of the ship's inventory upon arriving at the Port of Sumeru City.

"Thanks," Sethos says. He gives Shams a quick nod and shoves the pamphlet into his trousers pocket. "Are you on vacation now?"

"After wrapping up this latest shipment absolutely. Just wait. Tonight

I'm going to get even drunker than Zhuoying on a bad day." Shams points at the slight sailor who is leaning against one of the canopy poles, holding her head and hiccoughing quietly to herself.

"That would be pretty difficult," Sethos responds good-naturedly. Shams laughs around his last few mouthfuls of biryani and Sethos makes a note to slip Zhuoying some hangover soup from Mairamou in the morning.

He had seen Mairamou already this morning during his first round of errands where she had expressed an odd amount of concern for Sethos' health. His worries — the mage's story, the canister, the burdens of the temple, his tentative friendship with Kabukimono — must have shown on his face more than usual and Sethos makes another note to reassure her that he's perfectly fine the next time he sees her.

"Damn," Sham says appreciatively. His voice is still hoarse from eating the biryani so quickly. "That guy sure is fast."

Sethos looks away from Zhuoying instantly, before Shams finishes speaking. Somehow, Sethos knows that Shams is referring to Kabukimono and looks up in time to see a blur of white and teal darting through the upper branches of the Great Tree.

Shams lets out a low and impressed whistle. Sethos' eyes begin to water from looking towards the sun and going without blinking for too long as he tracks Kabukimono's rapid movement from branch to branch.

It reminds Sethos of the occasional initial sightings of Kabukimono — "Hat Guy" — during his first few weeks in Sumeru City. He absentmindedly plays with the tassels on the ends of his scarf. If he concentrates, he can almost hear the chiming of the bells at the ends of Kabukimono's giant hat.

In the distance, through the panels of fabric above the docks, Kabukimono jumps down from a branch of the Great Tree and glares in Sethos' direction before tilting his head imperceptibly towards the Puspa Café terrace below.

"I'll let you know about the differences the next time we meet up."

Sethos had said this to Kabukimono after receiving the canister. He hadn't realized it in that moment, but there was a promise in those words — an assumption that they would see each other again

relatively soon.

And now, Kabukimono is requesting — demanding, really, but Sethos has accepted that this is Kabukimono's method of asking — his presence, presumably to talk about what was in the canister and to help with Kabukimono's thesis.

Sethos suddenly feels warm as he quickly bids Shams goodbye and takes off in the direction of Puspa Café.

It feels nice to be wanted, like Sethos has an even better reason to be here in the city in addition to his duty as heir to the temple.

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Sethos has never purposefully or officially arranged a meeting with Kabukimono.

They have just happened to be in the same place at the same time sometimes.

Sethos knows the truth of it — they know each others' schedules well enough to appear in the same place at the same time, able to write off seeing each other frequently as random coincidences. This seems to be the best way to deal with Kabukimono's skittishness, allowing the blue-haired Vahumana student to come to Sethos whenever he wants under the guise of random opportunity.

In Sethos' estimation, the only true coincidental meetings were their first two: when Kabukimono had stopped by to yell at Lesser Lord Kusanali — Nahida, Sethos keeps reminding himself — for giving him food, and the first time they had seen each other at Puspa Café on a rainy day.

Even their first encounter on their now-routine branch had been following a week of Sethos seeing "Hat Guy" all over the city while the two of them had run errands.

Sethos had made sure to always stick to the same places where "Hat Guy" had been seen travelling through. He doesn't feel ashamed about any of it, especially now that they're something close to friends.

He still hears whispers about Sumeru City's two "errand boys" as he makes his way around the city. They've died down now that Kabukimono is much busier with his Vahumana studies and doesn't have nearly as much time on his hands.

“No, no, I don't think he likes it, but I'm not like him. I'm a people person, and I enjoy running errands and taking on the easy tasks.”

Sethos laughs a bit as he ducks into the café remembering this conversation with a well-meaning Mairamou, who had asked if he thought Kabukimono enjoyed delivering others' letters. Kabukimono still hates running errands. Walking through the café dining room, Sethos briefly wonders if one of the reasons that Kabukimono has poured himself into his thesis paper is to avoid menial tasks.

He wouldn’t put it past Kabukimono to do this but, in Sethos' experience, Kabukimono is also type of person who will always do what he wants regardless. Sethos knows Kabukimono doesn’t like delivering letters or running errands, but whatever reasons Kabukimono has for doing them must be important enough to outweigh his personal distaste for them. The only thing Sethos has ever seen Kabukimono be truly interested in has been a growing intensity around his thesis paper.

Sometimes — admittedly rarely, but sometimes — Sethos wishes he could be a bit more like Kabukimono. At least when it comes to being more decisive about his own needs and wants.

Kabukimono’s head is bowed over a piles of paperwork neatly organized next to a steaming mug of what Sethos knows is Enteka’s most bitter black tea and a pile of courtesy baklava that Sethos will be tasked with either eating or taking with him or giving out to random passers-by on Treasures Street on his way home. He looks up as Sethos walks out onto the terrace, bells jingling softly as his hat shifts on his head.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kabukimono asks.

It’s so unexpected for Kabukimono to ask after his well-being, and so different from the gentle prodding of Mairamou and awkward camaraderie of Sham along with the other sailors down at the docks that Sethos startles as he sits down. His knee knocks against the centre support of the table, nearly knocking over the small teapot next to the baklava plate.

Kabukimono’s glare intensifies.

“Nothing,” Sethos says. He grins at Kabukimono and finds that, despite the confusing thoughts and homesickness that had been swirling around his head since experiencing what was in the canned knowledge canister, his happiness is genuine.

He's just really happy to see Kabukimono again.

"Your face says otherwise," Kabukimono says. He narrows his dark blue eyes and leans forward until the brim of his hat brushes against Sethos' hair.

Pointing underneath his own eyes, Kabukimono tugs a bit at the skin underneath them. "You have bruises here."

"I'm surprised you don't too, Mister Akademiya Student," Sethos teases. He keeps it gentle but is still reeling somewhat from Kabukimono's aggressive concern.

Sethos picks up a piece of baklava and holds it in front of his face for a few seconds before eating it. Honey drips out from in between the flaky pastry layers and down Sethos' fingers. He pops the square into his mouth and then licks the tips of his fingers before wiping them onto a cloth napkin.

When he looks back up, Kabukimono has a murderous expression on his face.

"I'm sorry," Sethos says, swallowing his baklava so quickly that he nearly chokes on it. Remembering their non-argument the last time the two of them met up at Puspa Café, Sethos holds his hands up in front of him. "I just had a busy morning of errands. I get bored when I'm inside for too long."

He nearly jokes about picking up the slack as the only Sumeru City Errand Boy in Kabukimono's absence, but thinks better of it and smiles softly at Kabukimono instead.

"The canister," Kabukimono says, leaning into Sethos' space again.

Sethos stares back, waiting for Kabukimono to elaborate.

With an annoyed huff into Sethos' face, Kabukimono sits back, upright in his chair as he crosses his arms over his chest. His breath smells like tea and his eyebrow twitches as he swallows audibly.

"It didn't…" Kabukimono bites his lip, visibly frustrated. His next words trip out bitterly, as if Kabukimono would rather be doing anything else but saying them. "The canned knowledge…it didn't… hurt you? Bu— Nahida said it was safe."

Only then does it occur to Sethos that this is another way that

Kabukimono is showing concern for Sethos' well-being in his own awkward way.

"I'm fine," Sethos says brightly, a bit more confident now that he knows what Kabukimono is asking. "It was a lot like watching a film from a kamera, except I was living it," he adds, anticipating Kabukimono's next question.

Kabukimono still looks apprehensive.

"You've never used one before?" Sethos asks, suddenly curious. He knows that most canned knowledge had been highly-regulated by the Akademiya before Lesser Lord Kusanali had abolished the Akasha system. Kabukimono had told him that it would work, and that Sethos had automatic access as the Temple of Silence heir, but hadn't elaborated on his own experiences.

"No. I never have." A pained expression crosses Kabukimono's face, telling Sethos there's much more behind this answer that Kabukimono isn't telling him.

Sethos hums. "Like I said, it was almost like watching a film, but I was one of the main characters."

"Who?"

"The mage," Sethos answers. He finds himself leaning forward as he speaks, drawn in by Kabukimono's obvious interest and curiosity. "She knew that Demir would betray her and went through with all of it anyway to prove her point."

"Demir?"

"Oh! The Dastur. From what the canister showed me, that was his name."

With an unnatural grace that Sethos realizes he's grown used to, Kabukimono pulls a pen out from his shirt pocket and opens one of the many notebooks in front of him to a blank page.

"Tell me," Kabukimono demands, the pen in his hand hovering, ready to write down everything Sethos says.

Chapter End Notes

Phew. This is a bit of a bridge chapter into the natural conclusion

for this story. I struggled with it a lot actually (in addition to writing Wanderer's POV alongside it as a companion fic to be posted later this week) so hopefully it came out alright. I can now say that this fic will be eight chapters plus an epilogue (so nine total) and has been updated accordingly.

Thank you so much for reading!

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